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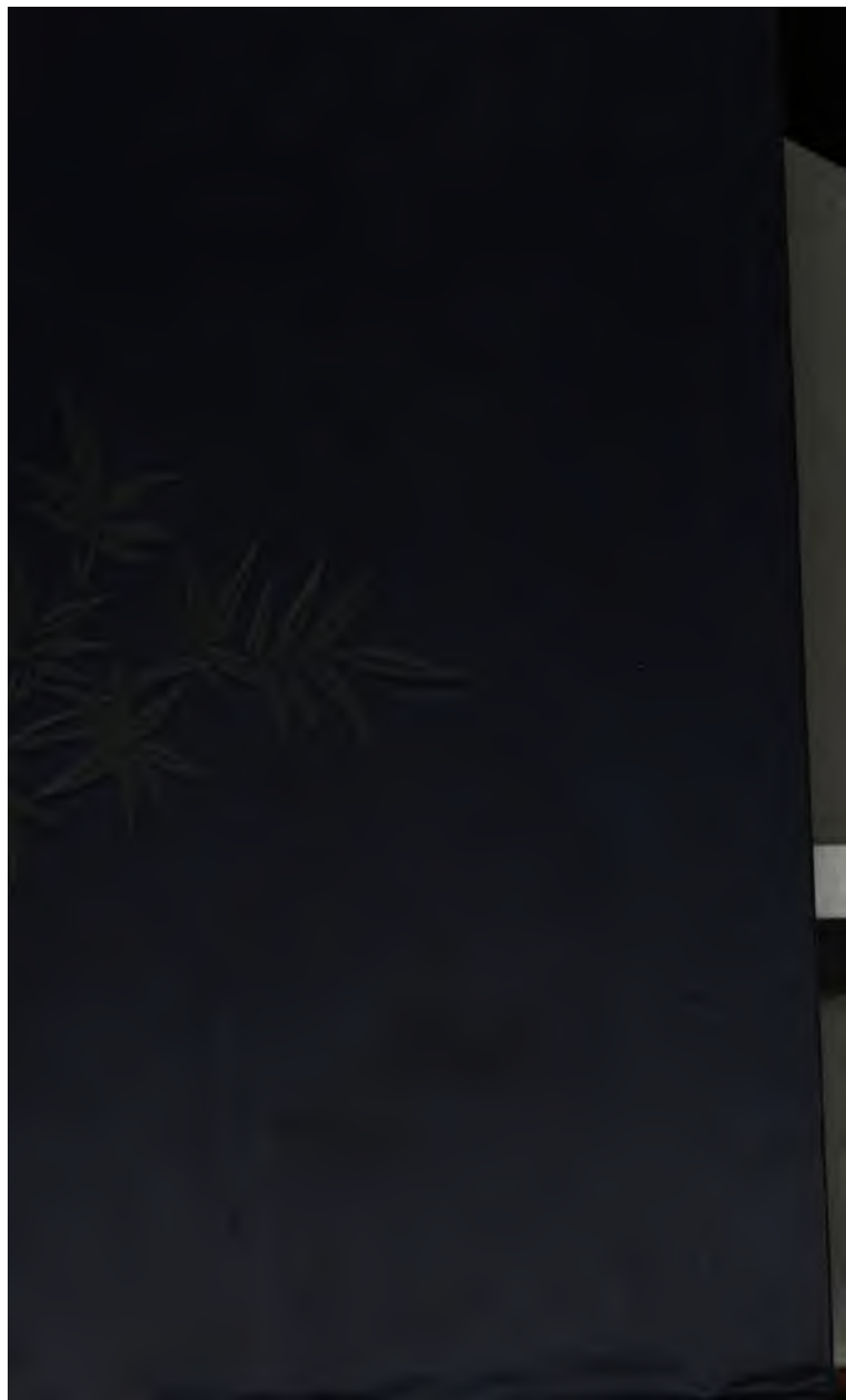
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A MATTER-OF-FACT GIRL.



A MATTER-OF-FACT GIRL.

BY

THEO. GIFT,

AUTHOR OF "PRETTY MISS BELLEW," "TRUE TO HER TRUST,"
ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.



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TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE ST., STRAND.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.	
IN A BIG HOTEL	PAGE 1
CHAPTER II.	
AN OLD STORY	26
CHAPTER III.	
"OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY"	51
CHAPTER IV.	
THE HOSPICE OF HAMPSFELL	71
CHAPTER V.	
THAT LITTLE SPANIARD!	98
CHAPTER VI.	
BERRIE ADVISES MARRIAGE	120

CHAPTER VII.

	PAGE
"IT COULDN'T HAVE BEEN YOU!"	149

CHAPTER VIII.

"VOWS TRACED ON SAND"	182
-------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER IX.

"A WORTHLESS WOMAN, MERE COLD CLAY, AS ALL FALSE THINGS ARE"	206
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A MATTER-OF-FACT GIRL.

A MATTER-OF-FACT GIRL:

A STORY OF LAKE LANCASHIRE.

CHAPTER I.

IN A BIG HOTEL.

“WINDOWS open again, Berrie!”

“Why, grandmamma, do you feel it cold?”

“Cold! of course it is cold. Why, look at the fog over the bay, and the wind coming right off it! Shut them quickly, child, make haste, or I shall catch my death. I believe you would sit with open windows in the middle of January if you had your way.”

It is not the middle of January now, but the latter half of June; the sunshine is streaming warm and pure through a faint pearly mist too transparent to do aught but give a pale opal tinge to the blue waters of the bay; and the air which comes in at the open window is as soft and balmy as an infant's kiss; but Mrs. Henniker (Dalton-Henniker it is in the visitors'-book on the hall-table of the hotel downstairs) says this in a sharply querulous tone, and standing half in and half out of the room, with the door held between her and the offending breeze as though it were laden with some pestilent miasma.

Not a prepossessing-looking old lady, Mrs. Henniker. Tall and thin and large boned, but bent almost double beneath her eighty years, wearing a very gay cap

with a lot of shabby artificial flowers in it, a rough brown front with the parting not as much in the middle as it might be, and as many wrinkles as the bark of an ancient apple-tree, from which indeed her skin, both in colour and texture, is not strikingly dissimilar. Round her shoulders she has a warm Paisley shawl with a smaller knitted one underneath it, and round her neck a gray woollen "cloud" of Berrie's knitting, one end of which she holds tightly against her mouth, while her granddaughter, throwing down the book which she has been reading, hastens to do as she is bid and shut out the morning air which she had been enjoying with her small dark head against the window-frame until now.

"Any letters this morning, Berrie?"

"I sent you in one with your breakfast, grandmamma."

"I am quite aware of that. Have *you* had any? I wish you would not prevaricate, child."

The girl's brown cheek flushes and a sudden sparkle flashes into the bright dark eyes; but she answers coolly enough:

"I am not going to do so. Yes, I had two letters—one from Dolly and the other from an old school-fellow. Would you like to see Dolly's? You can if you please."

She holds it out as she speaks, and Mrs. Henniker takes it with a grunt which does not express gratitude. Being a contradictory old lady, she feels immediately that she would rather see the letter which is not offered; but as she has hardly an excuse for asking for it she consoles

herself with the reflection that there are always plenty of holes to be picked in Dolly's epistles, and that Dolly's sister is peculiarly sensitive to such hole-pickings. Indeed, the girl's fingers (she has taken up a piece of knitting and is busying herself with it) are perceptibly nervous even during the process—a long one—of fitting on her grandmother's spectacles, and the short acrid laugh which heralds the first comment makes her wince as if she had been struck.

“ ‘Missing you awfully.’ Your sister is as slangy as most underbred girls I see. *Awfully!* What a word! I should have liked to hear any young lady use it in my days.”

“It is common enough nowadays at all events,” says Berrie boldly. “I don't think Dolly is at all singular in using it.”

"I never said she was, my dear. I've no doubt the word is common enough, and Dolly too for that matter; but that doesn't make either of them a bit the more ladylike. 'Father in trouble!' I never knew the time when your father wasn't in trouble. He's one of those men who are always in difficulties, always have been, and always will be. Ah dear! my poor daughter found that out to her cost. But it was her own fault, her own fault after all."

"And if she was as happy a woman as my stepmother, I don't think she was to be pitied," Berrie answers, knitting very fast, though with somewhat unsteady fingers still. "Father may have difficulties. With these bad years and nine children I daresay a good many men would have; but I'm sure he'd never let any of us

feel them if he could help it; and he is the kindest, best——”

Berrie shows signs of choking, and her grandmother, having succeeded in rousing her sufficiently, becomes more cheerful, and even smiles patronisingly as she lifts an admonitory finger.

“There, there, my dear, don’t excite yourself, and spare me the list of your father’s perfections. It’s very easy to exalt those that are away from you; but I wish you would think a little more of those you are with and to whom you owe a good deal more than you’re ever likely to do to anyone else. Why, even your sister says ‘It must be pleasant to be travelling about from one pretty place to another,’ and I should think it was; though I don’t know where you’d ever get a chance of it if it wasn’t for me. I daresay she

envies you finely; but girls are a sad ungrateful lot, and I fear you are no better than the rest, Berrie."

As this accusation is only levelled against Berrie, the girl makes no answer. She seldom does, save when it is her family who are attacked; and, perhaps, she does not feel very grateful. Mrs. Henniker, however, is averse to silence, and having finished Dolly's letter, which is little more than a note after all, and has nothing particular in it, she becomes restless and looks at her watch.

"Eleven o'clock. Do you think the sun is on the drawing-room yet, Berrie?"

"Oh yes, it's pretty sure to be. Do you feel ready to go down, grandmamma?"

"I don't feel at all well enough, if you mean that, but it is certainly a little more lively there; and I can see you are

in one of your stupid moods when there is not a word to be got out of you. But you always were a very stupid girl, Berrie, and no amount of taking you about improves you. I'm sure I pity your husband; that is if he happens to be a lively man. I do with all my heart."

As Berrie's husband, though frequently dragged into the conversation, is still a purely hypothetical personage in Mrs. Henniker's eyes, Berrie does not feel her own heart much affected by her grandmother's sympathy for him, and simply knits on until again interrupted.

"Open the door, child, and see if that blind woman has gone down yet. If she has, it's no use my doing so, for she is sure to have taken the armchair in my corner. Blind people are always so abominably selfish. Well, has she?"

"No, grandmamma, her door is still shut ; but her husband is in the corridor."

"Then that means that she will be out in a minute. Is my cap straight? No, never mind; I will see to that. Just call Parker to me and go down yourself at once, *at once*, do you hear, child? and take one of the armchairs for me; the sunny one if it's empty, or if you can get anyone out of it. Don't be foolish about it, make haste."

And Berrie coils up her knitting and goes, only pausing to put in her head at the next room and desire Parker, her grandmother's maid, to attend that venerable lady. It is not a very agreeable errand, however, on which she is bent, and involuntarily her feet linger as she crosses the gallery and descends the wide shallow-stepped staircase to the

public drawing-room on the ground-floor of the hotel. One or two new arrivals are coming up the stairs, preceded by a chambermaid and followed by a porter laden with luggage. They look dusty and tired, grimy too, showing that they have passed through the "Black Country" on their journey north, and stare curiously at the small trim figure with its handful of soft white knitting and plain holland gown.

There is always something delicious yet tantalising to a jaded traveller choked with dust and gritty with steam-coal, in the cool, fresh, immaculately clean appearance of the inmates of the house at which he has just arrived; but Berrie takes the stare to imply surprise at her unprotected girlish presence on the hotel staircase, and, though she does not blush, she

makes rather more haste to the drawing-room in consequence.

There are not many people there. In the morning the sojourners at the Bay hotel, Grange-over-Sands, are wont to enjoy the pure sunshine and sea breeze in brisk constitutionals either along the edge of the bay or over the green wooded hills which surround this favoured nook of Lake Lancashire; or in going down to the station to see the London train come in, and get the morning paper. There is excitement too in watching the matutinal departure of the Windermere coach with its four prancing bays and cheery fanfares upon the horn; but still there are always some people who stay indoors. Berrie finds about half-a-dozen collected in the drawing-room, one or two spinster-looking ladies writing letters with very scratchy

pens on voluminous sheets of paper, an invalid girl leaning back in an armchair gazing longingly out into the sunshine, and a pleasant-looking old lady seated knitting in the one opposite to her, a very young, *very* frightened bride, whose husband has left her there while he goes down to the station for a paper, and who turns deeply pink every time an eye happens to wander in her direction; and a cross-looking elderly gentleman, who also appears to be waiting for somebody, from the frequency with which he draws out his watch and mutters uncomplimentary ejaculations on the length of time women take in "figging themselves out." All these Berrie sees in the first glance—sees too that the particular easy-chair which her grandmother has already appropriated as her special property is by good fortune

vacant. The elderly gentleman is standing near it, however, and has just cast a glance at its cushioned recess, as though meditating settling himself therein as the girl opens the door; and in dread lest he should do so, and so put before her the terrible necessity of "getting him out of it," which, as he is "only a man," she is well aware Mrs. Henniker will expect her to do, she makes a dash across the room and flings herself desperately into the seat much as if she were pursued by a mad bull. Of course everybody looks at her, and the elderly gentleman, against whom she has brushed rather roughly in her passage to the coveted chair, makes up his mind that he *was* just going to sit down on it, and allows his mutterings against women—young women this time—to become rather more audible. It is

very unpleasant for poor Berrie, who knows that she is being set down as both greedy and ill-bred ; but it is still worse when, three minutes later, the door opens again and there enters, not her grandmother, but a blind lady, evidently in feeble health, and leaning on the arm of a white-haired clergyman, her husband. This couple have only arrived at the hotel on the previous day, and have already excited general notice and sympathy by the sweet face and affliction of the wife, and the tender devotion of her husband to her. As they make their appearance now, he is saying to her :

“ I will just settle you in a comfortable chair here then, dear, while I go and attend to that business. You won't mind being left for half an hour, and you must lean back and rest.” And then he looks round

the room for the "comfortable chair," and sees that those ordinarily going by that name are all occupied; two by people with as good a claim to them, even in his eyes, as his wife; and the other by a young woman who certainly has no appearance in the world of requiring such a luxury, and would indeed give her ears at that moment to surrender it. Involuntarily his eyes turn towards her, as do those of her neighbours, and Berrie's cheeks burn till they are as crimson as any of her namesakes in the autumnal hedgerows. It is just one of those momentary affairs which take many words in telling, but are as painful as they are fleeting.

"Pray don't mind about me, dear; I shall be comfortable anywhere," says the blind lady gently, and with an intuitive perception of the difficulty.

"I wish *I* had an easy-chair to give up to you, ma'am," puts in the elderly gentleman, glaring angrily at Berrie; and the girl half rises.

"I am——keeping it for my grandmother," she is about to explain, when there is a tap on her shoulder, Mrs. Henniker, attended by Parker and with her front smoothed and put straight, has come into the room and is standing by her.

"Very sorry to disturb you, my dear," says the venerable lady, "but you are young you know, and we old people claim the privilege of ease. Thank you, my child." She drops down into the chair with a pleasant apologetic smile. Parker hands her her glasses, her smelling salts, a volume of Bishop Hall's sermons. Berrie stands beside her, her cheeks still crimson

with the past awkwardness and the misrepresenting tone of her grandmother's voice, which seems to have put her behaviour in a worse light than ever, the elderly gentleman chuckles openly, the two spinsters put their heads together and whisper : "Serves her right. What a selfish girl !" The blind lady's husband has found her a seat elsewhere and gone away. Then the scratch scratch of pens and click of knitting-needles begin again. Berrie subsides on to the window-sill and knits away too, breaking off now and then to answer her grandmother's remarks or put something right in the old lady's work. The mist fades off the sea altogether, and the sun comes out hotter and hotter and shines straight in at the window where Mrs. Henniker and her granddaughter are sitting. The clergyman has come back and taken his wife out.

The elderly gentleman has gone out too with his wife and daughters, neither of whom seem at all impressed by his ill-temper. One of the spinsters gets into conversation with Berrie's grandmother. She and her sister have been wintering at Nice, where they found it very cold. Her sister suffers from her bronchial tubes. Mrs. Henniker has been wintering at Brighton, where it was quite warm. She suffers from rheumatism. They become quite friendly while discussing the relative merits of home and foreign watering-places, and home and foreign doctors.

At last Berrie summons courage to say:


"If you don't want me, grandma, I will go out for a turn;" and, receiving an affirmatory nod, springs to her feet and escapes through the open French window on to the terrace without.

What a blessed relief it is, from the close sun-heated room inside, to find herself out there in the pure sweet air, with a mingled scent of fir-woods and new-mown hay all about her, roses nodding their white and crimson heads to the breeze, and little snow-white clouds chasing each other over a bright blue sky.

Behind her is the hotel, built on the steep slope of a hill and bowered in tall trees. Before her the hotel garden sloping sharply down in a succession of wooded terraces terminating in a tennis-lawn almost to the bay, from which it is only divided by a strip of dusty white road, with the little station on the other side of it looking like a mere appurtenance of the lordly building in its rear. All around are other hills, wooded too from base to summit, with higher ranges in the background ; and

below the sea, curving in and out of a dozen tiny little bays, with low tree-covered points running out into the blue water, and the railway circling round them like a black thread. There is no village apparent ; only one or two gable-ends, the tower of a church, and here and there a column of thin blue smoke rising up amongst the trees, so that the big hotel seems to queen it alone, as if Grange-over-Sands were contained in itself and had no other existence ; though, in truth, the tiny townlet nestles down snugly enough under the sheltering hills at the head of Morecambe Bay.

To-day, now that the mist is gone, it is so clear that Berrie can distinguish the trees and white buildings of other towns or villages on the farther side of the great harbour, with a lovely green island crowned with a Grecian temple, standing out of the



blue waters between her and them ; and far far away a line of distant mountains, cut out faintly against an opal sky. It is all very fair, very sweet and gay. Even the tiny fishing-boats dotting the bay with their white sails seem to dance and curtsy over the waves.

Berrie draws a long breath of mingled pleasure and relief, and takes herself off to a bench on one of the terrace walks, where, shaded by the spreading boughs of a magnificent ash-tree, she can enjoy the scene and read her letters over again in peace and quiet.

“Poor Dolly,” she murmurs to herself, as she glances over the first badly-written youthfully-worded effusion. “It was too bad to show you to grandmamma ; only I knew, if I hadn’t, she would have thought there was something about her in it, and

never rested till she had seen it. Oh dear, I wonder if most old ladies are like grand-mamma! If so, I hope I shan't live to be old. I'm afraid I shall, though. I'm too dreadfully healthy to die young. But one thing I'm determined on, I *won't* wear a front—that at least is not obligatory; and I won't rouge and pearl-powder myself of an evening, let me be as brown and wrinkled as I may. Ah Dolly, you can't miss me as much as I do you and all of you. I wonder when I shall be let go home? It seems so hard to be so near now, up in the north again, and yet not able to see them. Phil might have written to me, I think; but he's not fond of writing. He's not like Edla. Dear Edla, what a volume she always sends me! I haven't half taken it in yet;" and Berrie crams Dolly's letter back into her pocket, and taking out the

other becomes so absorbed in it that, when one of the thin foreign sheets on which it is written escapes from her fingers and blows away, she never notices that anyone is near her, and, springing up to clutch it, nearly runs her head into the waistcoat of a tall gentleman who has just climbed the steep path at her left, and is almost at her side.

He is a very handsome man. She sees that even as he stoops courteously for the truant page of criss-crossed writing and returns it to her; a man of two or three and thirty or thereabouts, clean shaven save for a heavy moustache, and fair-haired, but deeply bronzed as if with foreign suns, and with blue, bright, keenly-glancing eyes which seem to see through Berrie even in the momentary glance he casts upon her ere he pursues his way fol-

lowed by a porter carrying his port-manteau.

“A soldierly-looking man ; I wonder who he is ?” she thinks, and then she shivers. His figure has come between her and the sunshine, and up here it feels cool in the shade. Country people tell you it is unlucky to shiver if a stranger crosses your path ; but Berrie is not superstitious, and forgets all about him in the perusal of Edla von Freilo’s letter.

CHAPTER II.

AN OLD STORY.


“Bay Hotel, Grange-over-Sands.

“MY DEAR FRANK,

“Your letter has just been read, having followed me about from place to place and accumulated post-marks one on top of another with a devoted persistency which makes me feel remorseful. Don’t slang me, however, for not giving you my address. I gave it to none, for the very good reason that I had no clear idea myself of where I was going, and didn’t expect to be written to. When one has been out of the way of postmen’s knocks,


postmen and letters generally for a couple of years, one's ideas of the necessity of such matters generally become somewhat hazy and non-exacting. I came back upon some of my friends rather like a ghost, and was willing to vanish in like manner, knowing that the exits of those individuals are usually more welcome than their appearance. There are some friends, however, whom it isn't easy to shake off or tire out, and I believe, Frank, you're one of them. Do you know I'm rather glad of it, and that, despite the cynicism and misanthropy of which you accuse me, I was honestly and no end pleased to get your letter, and am almost as much so to answer it.

“You ask what I am doing. Well, nothing in particular but roaming about in an aimless sort of way, spending a few



days here and a few days there, and making acquaintance with odd nooks and corners where I never happened to have been before, and which have something either in the picturesque or historical way to recommend them : also which are not generally frequented by tourists. I'm half ashamed to own that I've already found so many of these same Meccas that I'm inclined to think that we need not make annual pilgrimages abroad in search of foreign ones ; and that I myself might have spared the last five years' pursuit of unfamiliar woods and waters, uncouth dialects and unfashionable townships, and devoted the same to my own country instead. After all one finds quite as much ignorance here and quite as much vice, as many thieves and . . . *almost* . . . as many fleas ! What more can one desire !

“Just now, however, as you’ll see by the heading of this letter, I’ve come nearer to civilisation, Grange being only about eight miles from Windermere, a bonny green nook shut in by the Lancashire hills and fells on the shores of Morecambe Bay. Now, I bet anything you grasp your atlas with a ‘—— it! Where is the place though? I never heard of it.’ But in the first place you mightn’t find it in any but a very modern atlas; and in the next I doubt whether nine out of ten of the Londoners who visit the Lakes ever *have* heard of it, or been near it. Hence of course its attraction for me, and the charm which led me across the fiend-begotten ‘Black Country,’ even to pass through which in the express makes one think that if Dante got half as coal-gritty, black, and smoke-smothered




in his passage through the Inferno, 'la bella Beatrice' was hardly 'worth the candle' of getting to see her.

"Is Grange worth the candle? Well, not to me. 'Blessed are they who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed.' I expected to find a North-country Paradise with Devonshire ferns and Cumbrian crags, Channel Island sunshine and Scottish breezes, and all this unspoilt by the foot of (tourist) man or the skirts of (tourist) woman, and embellished only by a few rustic hovels and a homely inn, where I should be fed on boiled bacon and new-laid eggs, and served by mine host's strapping daughter in linen kirtle and blue worsted hose! I found instead a baby watering-place, the Ventnor of Liverpudlians and Manchester men, and embellished by a monster hotel with table-d'hôte, *diners à*

la Russe, and at least twenty daintily decorous chambermaids, neither strapping in appearance, nor related daughterwise or otherwise to the landlord. I also found—I must own it—the sunshine and the breeze, and in a stroll taken this morning have sat on a crag and peeped into a gully full of ferns; yet I doubt whether these will keep me more than a day or two, if that. Don't write to me here, therefore, as your letter would find me flown. Where to? Heaven knows, or at least if heaven does, which I doubt, I don't. Since, however, you care enough for me to want to do so you shall, as soon as I am fixed in my next habitat.

“It will *not* be London. I would like to please you, dear old boy, but there are things one can't do; and there are reasons why that's one of them: the very reasons



(excuse me for saying so) which seem most cogent to you for bringing me there. . . . Yes, I'm not going to funk the subject any longer . . . *her* presence! You say 'You could not have known Vivian Bruce was in town and a widow or you would not have gone.' I answer you, 'I did know; and that was why I went.' A widow! Aye, and of how many weeks' standing! Why, her wretched husband was alive when I landed in England scarce two months back. I had just come to face the possibility of meeting her as a wife, and now—— No, let the past be what it may, let it be that she was over-persuaded, deceived, what you will, still if she be in any way the Vivian I once imagined her, if she be a woman of even ordinary delicacy (I had almost said decency), I, of all men, must be the last person she would wish to see just now when

her head can hardly have got used to the feel of its widow's cap, and her husband has not been four weeks in his grave. No, in the autumn perhaps, and if she wishes to renew an acquaintance, slain and buried in anything but an honest and wholesome fashion five years ago, I might—— But where is the good of talking about it now? I won't talk about her here at any rate; and——there's a big bell ringing like mad!

“Eight o'clock p.m.

“It was for dinner! A big room with a bow-window looking on the bay and a long table with about thirty people gathered round it, already midway through their soup when I got there, and some of them making a great deal more noise over it than an Arab chief over his cous-coussoo. Somehow one doesn't mind those sort of things in the Desert; but here in England they


grate on one. It's inconsistent, but modern Conservatism is inconsistent, and I never was a Liberal. I rather like 'the noble savage' when his last oil costume is not very rancid. I've a real kindly feeling for my father's tenants in dear old Dingleberry; but I can't stand the British middle classes, and I regard the small shopkeeper and the 'working man' as socially humbugging and personally offensive.

"A member of the last but one named class sat opposite to me at table: a publican, I should say, or a pork-butcher out for 'an 'oliday' with his 'good lady.' She wore a purple satin gown shot with red, a huge frill of cotton lace round her throat, and a brooch like a cheese-plate with the portrait of her husband in it reposing happily on her own expansive charms. He was the size of a prize ox, wore a black velvet waist-

coat and his hair oiled to such an extent that I shuddered for the person sitting next to him. Both of them conversed in the freest fashion, and untrammelled by any aspirates, with anybody whose eye happened by ill fortune to wander in their direction : the husband giving us the bill of fare of all the hotels at Margate and Ramsgate to which he had been in the habit of taking his 'missus for a blow ;' the wife making herself even hotter than nature had made her by singing the praises of 'Mr. Newman 'All, under whom' (she observed to a lady near her) 'she 'ad 'ad the privilege of sitting under ever since she and her good 'usband were made one.' On my left, and carefully averting their eyes from these people, were a couple of old maids, sister 'muttons dressed lamb fashion,' and prattling with lamblike innocence and vivacity to a stout

Low-Church looking parson opposite, with (suggestive decoration!) a wedding-ring on his little finger. On my right was a small girl with curly hair cut short like a boy's, and who appeared to be companion to an old lady on her other side: one of those fearful witchlike old women decked out like an American Indian in powder, paint, false teeth, and false flowers, that one meets at Bath or Brighton boarding-houses. This venerable charmer grumbled at everything she ate, sniffed at the wine and snapped at the girl; not loudly or coarsely; but in that quiet, acrid 'sotto voce' which old dowagers know so well how to use; and occasionally conversed a little in a feeble, high-bred, condescending voice with a severe-looking old gentleman at the head of the table. The girl never opened her lips except to eat her dinner, save once, and

that was in a smile, when a little black-muzzled foreigner opposite to her observed in Spanish to the friend near him that she was the very image, in air and contour, of a small, bright-eyed Scotch terrier belonging to the landlord, and then seated on the window-ledge waiting for dinner to be over. It was a shame, perhaps, but the comparison really wasn't inapt, and I couldn't resist glancing from the dog to the girl, when to my surprise I saw her face lighted up with a smile, quickly subdued indeed, but so full of the most thorough saucy enjoyment, and so utterly devoid of any of that petty feeling which would have made most young women stiffen with indignation or flutter with wounded vanity, that I felt half inclined to punch the foreigner's head. I was rather astonished, however, that a girl in her position (she wore the plainest



little black frock with a linen collar, and her hands were as brown as a peasant-girl's) should understand Spanish ; but that she did, was evident ; though I doubt whether anyone but myself noticed it. For the rest, her taciturnity made the one spot of silence in the prevailing sea of small-talk, and I was grateful for it. No, my dear Frank, with the din-echoes of that buzz still in my ears, I don't think I can stay here another day ; and now the piano is beginning in the drawing-room, and a fearful hymn-tune in a cracked voice comes straight up through my window and invades me even here ! Good-bye, old fellow, and don't bother your head about me or my doings till you see me.

“Your friend anywhere,


“RANDAL COMYNS.”

Flinging down his pen impatiently, Randal Comyns rises and shuts the window in the face of the voice which is just quivering out something about "There is a fount where all who thirst," and then, finding the room unbearably warm, folds up the bulky epistle he has just concluded, crams it into an envelope (he is not a tidy man, and does everything in a reckless, heavy-handed fashion), addresses it, and leaving it on the table to be posted, sallies out and down to the terrace in front of the hotel. It is hot even there : as sultry as you would expect it to be in August rather than in the last days of June : a night without moon or stars, noiseless, windless, almost airless. Even the tide is out, so there is no sound of the sea lapping on its sandy bed ; and the village has gone to sleep already down in its sheltered

hollow. Only the hotel windows are thrown wide open, and the yellow lamp-light within shines out upon the terrace walk and on the lower part of the trunks of the tall trees which stand up darkly against a blue-black sky, under which Comyns strolls to and fro enjoying a cigar. Down below his feet he can see a few lights glimmering out from the vague masses of black foliage behind which the village lies; and far away to the left, many miles out across the inky obscurity, a gleaming row of sparkles, the windows of one of the small townships on the opposite side of Morecambe Bay, but so distant as in no ways to disturb the sense of mystery and solitude imparted by the warm, hushed stillness of the summer night.

Comyns is glad of it, unconsciously

glad, for his mind has wandered far away, so far that he does not even remember where he is, and is back in a summer's night on the shores of the Gulf of Genoa. Steep hills tower behind him there, but they are covered with pine and cypress, and the slope along which he walks is fringed, not with oak and mountain-ash, but with orange-trees heavy with their golden fruit and waxlike blossoms, gnarled old citrons, and myrtles with clusters of starry flowers showing dimly white against the deep bronzed green of their foliage. The stars above shine brightly down on him and glisten back from the dark blue waters of the harbour. There is music there too, the melodious gurgle of a nightingale hidden in a seringa-bush hard by, and the plaintive "thrum, thrum" of a guitar from some cottage lower down the hill; but he



is not alone to listen to it. A woman walks beside him, a woman young as Hebe and fair as Aphrodite, a woman all in soft flowing white, with a hand white too and sweet as any orange-flower resting on his arm, and a bunch of crimson musky-scented roses in her bosom. To and fro, to and fro they pass in a silence more eloquent than many words, until at last the man (he is younger then and wears a uniform) stops short and presses his other hand firmly on that which lies upon his arm, saying, as he does so, one word :

“Vivian !”


She looks up at him. Her eyes are blue ordinarily and very light ; but from this southern starlit night they seem to borrow a mysterious phosphorescent gleam,

and make his blood thrill as they shine on him in the dimness.

“Dear Randal, you take this too hardly. It will not be such a long parting.”

“But it is a parting all the same, and that is it. I cannot realise it. I cannot believe that I stand here now with you so near me, your dear hand in mine, your eyes looking at me, you and I only, free to say what we will to one another, with no one to bore or interrupt us, and that in twenty-four hours I shall be miles and miles away, every hour making the distance farther, unable to see you or hear you, even to breathe the same air you do, or tread on the same land. Vivian, is it not hard to you?”

“Of course it is.” But perhaps she says it a little too calmly, for he drops



her hand, and turning, takes, not it, but her into his arms, trying to look into the fair, exquisite face as if he would read the very soul within.

"Love, say you will be true to me, promise it, swear it. I believe it would break my heart if you were not."

"Dear Randy, don't you know I will?"

"I trust so; but when I see you now or think of you, so beautiful and so admired—Vivian, swear it to me anyhow."

"No, I won't swear." She says it very sweetly, however, with her face lifted towards his and a tender smile on the delicate rose-tinged lips; "because swearing is very naughty; but I will promise you—anything you like."

"To be true to me, and my love and faith in you all the while we are parted, however long that may be, as true as I

will be to you till I come back to claim you. You promise me that?"

"Yes."

And then he folds her tighter in his arms, kissing her brow and eyes and lips, with eager murmured words of gratitude and love till the fair pale face glows with sudden colour, and the poor roses drop petal by petal in a crimson, heavy-scented shower to their feet.

"But never mind; I will give you a bunch of *seringa* instead," he says; "'mock orange-flower' as they call it;" and those blossoms are kissed one by one as he pins them in the other's place.

* * * * *

"Vivian Le Mesurier, only daughter of the late James Le Mesurier, of Les Colombières, Jersey, to Joshua Godfrey Bruce, of the firm of Bruce, Oysterveldt, and Co.,

of London. Amsterdam papers please copy."

What mocking burst of laughter from the hotel behind brought that paragraph suddenly into his mind and startled him from his dream: that paragraph read barely six months later while lounging on the after-deck of H.M.S. *Spitfire*, at anchor in the bay of Rio Janeiro? Mocking? Ah, it well might sound so; for it was all a mockery together—the orange-blossoms and the promise and the love on which he set such store. An old, old story, a story so trite and worn out that he can almost laugh at it himself now, but which has wrecked his life none the less, and made him the man he is—hard and reckless, a little bitter too, and given to small faith or liking for his fellow men and women. With a short,

echoing laugh at his own weakness in recalling the past, he turns on his heel and shakes the vision from his mind. At that moment he can find no excuse for her and wants none. Better even the hotel and its heterogeneous inhabitants.

Inside there it is all mellow lamplight, moving figures, and the hum of voices. Randal can distinguish that of the well-oiled publican suggesting that, perhaps, "no one would object to a little more music," and his wife urging someone to "jine them in a psalm to one of dear Mr. 'All's fav'rite tunes." Then the piano, with a dreadful false note in the treble, a burst of voices, and a shadow suddenly flung across the square of light upon the terrace walk. He looks up with a start, half because of the false note, and half because the shadow had fallen athwart

his own feet, and sees that the little dark-haired girl with the merry smile, whom he noticed at dinner, has seated herself on the window-sill and is gazing out into the night. She cannot see him where he stands leaning against a tree-trunk in the darkness, and he fancies there is something wistful and lonely in the expression of her face, and even in the clasp of the small brown hands on her knee. Standing there watching her, he wonders what she is thinking about, and whether by any chance she is feeling as solitary as himself. Just then, however, someone comes up behind her and thrusts a hymn-book into her hand. It is the fat woman.

“We’re just going to conclude with our chapel evenin’ ’ymn,” she says. “My ’usband plays ’em all by ear, an’ I’m sure you young ladies ’ould like to jine. The

words ain't scarce a bit altered from the Church version."

The girl turns her head a little, putting back the book, and saying "Thank you, she knows the words and tune;" but though she makes her little answer courteously and smilingly, Randal does not hear her voice mingling with the pious discord which at once arises, and feels sure, though her face is turned from him, that she has not "jined" as requested. He strolls down the bank to be a little farther from the noise, and when he comes back, the black dress and small boyish head have disappeared. The psalm is over too, and the publican's wife laughing loudly at one of her husband's jokes. The vulgar "Ha, ha, ha!" floats out upon the hot still air. Then there is a little chorus of "Good-night, good-night," from a group

of guests in another window. A clock strikes ten in the rear of the building, and down in the village a dog has begun barking in a monotonous, aggressive way, as if he meant to go on with it all night.

“I shall certainly leave this place to-morrow,” says Randal, and goes in and up to his room to bed.

CHAPTER III.

“OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY.”

BERRIE is writing a letter. It is to Edla von Freilo; and there is a slightly puzzled expression on the English maiden's face as she glances over the closely-written pages of the epistle lying beside her, and then rumples up her short hair and bites her pen perplexedly before returning to her own sheet and the incompleted sentence, the ink of which has got dry during her cogitations. Fraulein von Freilo is a very dear friend, the very dearest friend possible; and Berrie admires her more

than she does anyone else in the world ; but her friendship is a slightly onerous possession all the same ; for, though she does not expect her intimates to come up to her own level (which would of course be impossible), she does expect them to try to do so ; or at all events to follow her intellectual gyrations on a lower and more circumscribed plane ; and she also expects, when she condescends to write to an old school-fellow and disciple, to have her letter answered ; not merely in the conventional sense of the word, but answered fully and properly as to all the questions and arguments she may please to propound. Now the letter in question being written in very German-English, and full of such phrases as “the struggle for existence in the lower type-races,” “Kölliker’s polyphyletic hypotheses,” or

"elective strivings after dual inter-spiritualities," is clearly not one to be answered lightly; or rattled over in half an hour under a running fire of grandmamma's comments. Therefore Berrie has arisen early in order to get a nice quiet time before breakfast, and, not having made much use of the privilege at present, hardly knows whether to feel glad or sorry when Parker enters the room with a message that it is breakfast-time, and she is to go down by herself, as her grandmother has not had a good night and does not mean to get up till lunch. Berrie takes the first part of the news coolly enough, seeing that her grandmother never does get up to breakfast, and that she has always therefore to go down by herself; but the latter half, implying that she may have the whole morning for her own desires, fills

her with rejoicing, and she immediately decides on a long-projected ramble over the fells, and hastens downstairs to lay in a good substantial meal as a fitting preparation. Even Fraulein von Freilo believes in the necessity for eating, and indeed at school showed a most unspiritual affinity for sausage-cakes, slices of raw ham, and strong beer.

Everybody is at breakfast when Berrie goes down, and so she naturally gets a good deal stared at as she makes her way swiftly and quietly to the place kept for her with a very decided spot of rose colour in her soft round cheeks. It is not pleasant to have every eye turned on you ; and she feels grateful that the gentleman on her left is so big and broad-shouldered, and so absorbed in the consumption of his own breakfast, that he not only pays

no attention to her himself, but rather acts as a shield for her from the observation of the rest of the party. He is not a greedy person, however, for he manages to stretch out a hand to bring the cream-jug and hot buttered toast within reach of hers, and out of the clutches of the stout parson, who yesterday (Berrie remembers) absorbed those dainties so entirely, that she was fain to content herself with milk and dry toast, and be grateful at getting that. Also, when the little foreigner remarks to his friend in the vilest broken English, for the girl's benefit, that he "Suppose it ees ze Ingles clime make ze prètty young ladiesh so mucha more prètty in ze mornin's," the same person lays down his knife and fork and glares over his spectacles at the offender (in lifting her eyes, to say "Thank you," Berrie has just

gathered that he does wear those articles, and that his face is somehow not unfamiliar to her) with such severity that the poor little blue-chinned man shrivels up palpably; and, contenting himself with an inaudible execration against "*esos hombres barbaros*," pays no more attention to the solitary little girl during the remainder of the meal. She is not to remain wholly unmolested, however. Perhaps the sudden removal of his favourite dainties has drawn the widowed parson's eyes in the direction whither they have been transferred; or perhaps the double fire of attentions which he is receiving from the two maiden sisters has become a little embarrassing, even to his male and middle-aged vanity; for he looks hard at Berrie for the first time, and, seeing that she is young and comely, glances pointedly at her trim walking-dress as he answers

something one of the twain virgins is saying about the closeness of the morning, with :

"I see *one* young lady who is not to be daunted by warm weather. But," addressing himself to Berrie directly, "you are a real pedestrian, I fancy, and take your exercise matutinally."

Berrie is an ungrateful girl, however, and not to be drawn out by the blandly-clerical patronage. She just looks up at him for a moment, and answers "Yes," in that provoking open-eyed manner, which may be taken either interrogatively or affirmatively as you please.

"I have noticed you going out in all weathers," pursues the widower smilingly, while the twin sisters draw themselves up and affect not to hear, or be conscious that there is another young lady in the room.

—

"It was raining very heavily the day before yesterday, when I happened to see you coming in ; and I was quite surprised, I trust I may say gratified, to see you at dinner, with your — a — mamma, looking none the worse for it."

Whether by accident or of malice prepense, Berrie happens to have her mouth full of fried chicken when he pauses this time ; so he only gets a slight smile and a sound which may mean anything for answer. The elder spinsters are more indignant than ever. Will it turn out that this smug-looking widower is a gay Lothario ?

"Not that I am in the habit of watching my neighbours," says the good man pleasantly, encouraged to proceed by the double guarantee of his white choker and Berrie's youth ; as also by the fact that she is certainly much prettier than the

maiden sisters opposite him. "But in a little community, like ours here, I think we must all feel a—a Christian interest and fellowship for one another; and I have often had the idea that if we regularly organised walking or boating parties—— I am not a bad pedestrian myself; neither, as I find, are my good friends here"—bobbing his fat head suddenly towards the sisters, who as suddenly perform the acrobatic feat of relaxing into a twin smile for him, while keeping a stony profile towards Berrie—"and if we could join in our promenades—— Indeed, I almost wonder we have not ere this happened to meet you in yours. You must—a—find them very lonely, as your mother does not seem equal to accompanying you. I am sure I should be most happy——"

“I have no mother,” says Berrie, bluntly and distinctly, “and I don’t wonder at your not having met me, for I always go as far away as I can to avoid meeting anybody. I *like* being alone and getting away from people.”

With which crusher of further overtures, and having finished her breakfast, she pushes back her chair and rises, the gentleman on her left rising also, with the instinct of a well-bred man, to let her pass. He does not look at her, however, as he does so, or even lay down a letter he is perusing: yet there is a faint smile lurking under his heavy moustache, and he says to himself, with a laugh at the discomfited parson:


“By Jove, that little lassie knows how to stand by her own guns!”

It is a strangely sultry morning, as close and heavy as last night. A faint yellow

haze hangs over the dead calm waters of the bay, and the scent of roses and new-mown hay hangs almost too heavily on the warm languid air, unstirred by even the faintest zephyr of a breeze.

As Berrie plunges into the thick green wood, at the other side of the road which borders the hotel garden, she has a sense of entering one of the fern-houses at Kew, so steaming and oppressive is the air in the leafy alleys through which she has to wend her way.


It is no level way either. There are trees before and behind her, trees on either side, making a close-woven network of light green foliage overhead through which the sun's rays filter, as in golden rain; and only broken here and there by a mossy out-jutting crag, or a little open patch starred over with great



bunches of yellow rag-wort and wild wood-strawberries in all their profusion of snow-white blossom and ruddy fruit; but it is an upward climb the whole way, and getting steeper with every step she goes, till, when she pauses for breath and to look back through a gap in the foliage on one side of her, she sees, spreading below her gaze, a sea of shelving tree-tops with the topmost chimneys of the big hotel peering forth from them. In the distance, and far beyond, the great bay spread out like a lake of molten glass, with only a faint ripple of distant mountains showing dimly through the golden haze which hangs over everything. Berrie has no time to linger here, however. On she goes again until woods and trees are left behind, and she finds herself fairly on the fells with not so much as a stunted

fir-tree before her, no, nor a bush as high as her knee; nothing but short grass and daisies, with here and there a patch of gorse all aglow with honey-scented blossoms, and all alive with bees; and everywhere little nimble-legged mountain sheep feeding about in twos and threes, or lying asleep in any spot of shade they can find.

It is not so oppressive here as among those thickly-wooded hills up which she climbed so toilsomely awhile back, though they look now like mere green mounds, pigmies nestling under the knees of the ancient fells; but it is very hot, hotter than ever because there is no shade; nothing but that yellow haze, gradually deepening into orange, between her and the sun's rays. Berrie is not disheartened, however. She has climbed hills enough



in her day; and she is bent now on reaching a place she has heard of—the Hospice of Hampsfell, a stone hut erected in former years on the summit of the fell as a shelter for belated shepherds or travellers who might have wandered from the path upon these barren heights. Berrie has heard the waiters telling people of the wonderful view, extending even from the Yorkshire hills to the Isle of Man, which may be seen from thence; and being further told that this hospice is, as the crow flies, only a mile and a half from the village, has laughed at such a flea-bite of a walk for a healthy girl like herself, and determined to take it on the earliest opportunity. Now, therefore, and even though the testimony of her own active legs tells her that she must have gone three times that distance

already, she is not to be daunted by the self-evident sequence that either her informants were wrong or she has wandered woefully out of the track, but marches bravely onward, only pausing now and then to gather breath, or look around her in the hope of seeing the wished-for goal somewhere near.

It is strangely tiring work, however. She has been getting higher and higher, and yet the air seems to grow thicker as she goes, and the sun has disappeared altogether behind that dense tawny veil, across which woolly black clouds, torn and copper-coloured at the edges, are beginning to flit, and which has gradually blotted out sea and valley and distant mountains in one dingy vaporous blur, against which her small upright form, seen from a little distance, looks like a

shadow figure thrown by some giant magic-lantern. Not one human being, man or woman, has she encountered in her climb; and now even the sheep seem to have deserted her and departed to lower ranges or sheltered spots of which she knows nothing. Berrie stops short suddenly and gazes around her. It has dawned upon her in that moment that this hushed ominous stillness, this leaden air and dun-coloured sky, all mean one thing—a thunderstorm namely; and that to be caught in the latter on the top of these fells, with no shelter in sight and nothing but a white cotton alpenstock parasol for protection from rain, may not be pleasant even to a girl country born and bred. For one thing, what would grandmamma say?


Involuntarily she turns and looks back

in the direction whence she thinks, for she cannot be sure, that she originally came ; but there the whole sky is already black as ink, a blackness rapidly mounting higher and higher ; and even as she gazes at it a puff of hot fitful wind smites her in the face, and there is a heavy muttering sound echoing and re-echoing among those distant and now invisible mountains which peak the horizon. The storm is evidently coming on apace, and to retrace her steps in the face of it, even if she were certain of keeping in the right path (which in this gathering darkness and the utter sameness of all things around her seems doubtful), she feels sure that she could not reach Grange before it will be on her, and to be caught in a thunderstorm among those tangled woods would be far more dangerous than

even here, where, look where she may, she sees nothing but one unvarying rise and fall of dry yellowish-green grass, and scattered clumps of rock peering out like ruined gravestones.

It is no time for deliberation, however. Already that inky cloud in the rear has been twice illumined by a sudden flame-coloured glare; and now there is a peal of thunder, so loud and detonating that it seems to shake the solid earth on which she stands. Setting her teeth firmly, she turns from it and hurries forward. Another blinding flash follows, and seems to quiver in the air around her head, while the roar that follows might have been taken up by a hundred parks of artillery, so terrific are the rattling din and crashes bellowing backwards and forwards from one rugged hillside to another. It seems as if the

ancient fells were at war with one another ; and Berrie, dizzy and bewildered by the din of the elements, never even hears among them that sound which would have been most welcome—a man's voice shouting to her. It is twice repeated, however, and in a voice which knows by experience how to brave most storms, whether by sea or land ; and the second time Berrie hears it, and turning joyfully, sees through the rain, which is beginning to pelt down in hot, heavy drops, the figure of a man beckoning to her from a point on the fells a little higher up. In another moment, and before she has had time to make out that it is the same individual whom she saw arrive at the hotel the other day, and who looked so much older and less interesting seated at breakfast beside her in the morning, she is at his side, or he



at hers, and he has a firm hold of her hand, and is pointing to something low and gray, and not unlike an exaggerated pill-box, which seems to rise out of the grassy flats about a score of yards from them.

“ Make haste, child, or you’ll be drowned,” says the stranger sharply ; “ don’t you see the hospice before you ? ” and almost carries her off her feet by the swiftness with which he hurries her to it.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HOSPICE OF HAMPSFELL.

"THAT was rather a race," says Randal laughing, as he half thrusts, half lifts her in at the low stone doorway of the welcome refuge. "Pretty well taken your breath away, haven't I? But you would have been drenched through in another moment. Look how it is coming down now!"

It is coming down, fierce and heavy! A blinding sheet of water hissing on to the huge stones which form the rude shelter they have found for themselves;

while the sky is covered entirely with heavy copper-black clouds, thunder-charged, and stooping as low as though they meant to descend altogether and bury the hospice and its inhabitants in their sulphurous masses. Berrie only laughs, however, and shakes the raindrops off her hat and gown, regarding the former with a severely critical eye as she does so; for the dark red ribbon on it was new last week, and grand-mamma is not liberal of shillings for new ribbons; while of money of her own Berrie has none. She looks very lovely standing so in the doorway, with her pretty red lips apart, her cheeks flushed carnation-wise, and her bright dark eyes sparkling more brilliantly than usual from the run up hill and the girlish glee in an adventure; and Randal thinks so; although to him it is the mere ephemeral loveliness

of a child, and he hardly looks on her as a woman at all: certainly not one with any claims to beauty of the sort that he admires. Berrie, however, has had time to look at him as well; and is suffering from even a keener sense of disappointment than that which she experienced in her hasty glance at breakfast. It certainly is the man who passed her in the hotel garden; but he too has taken off his hat to knock the raindrops out of the brim, and in doing so has disclosed a decidedly thin, not to say bald, patch on the top of his head, which, taken in conjunction with a grayish thread here and there in his light hair, and sundry lines much too deep for beauty about his brow and mouth, give him quite an ancient look in the girl's eyes.

“And he wears glasses too when he is



eating," she says to herself, her eyes wandering to those offending articles as they dangle harmlessly against the breast of his rough gray serge blouse. "Why, he is old, quite an *old man*, and I thought him so handsome in that first glimpse. Not that it matters ! Old men are generally nicer than young ones ; but I don't like deceptive people."

"Were you looking for the hospice?" asks Randal, interrupting her meditations. "I had been examining it myself, and it's fortunate for you I happen to be long-sighted, for I was coming down from the roof to seek shelter from the storm, when I saw a young woman skirting the hill in rather a lost manner, and shouted to her."


"I am very glad you did," says Berrie frankly, and very busy dabbing the wet

bows of her hat-ribbon with her handkerchief, "for I was lost ; that is, I had been walking and walking for ever so long among the hills, and couldn't see a sign of this place ; though they told me it was not two miles off."

"I don't suppose it is, but as there is no road to it, and it stands in the middle of a strip of table-land, you don't see it until you're tolerably near to it, especially from the way you were coming. I suppose you thought it would be a high tower ?"

"Yes, I did."

"If it had been, I expect it would have been blown away long ago instead of sheltering us as comfortably as it's doing now, and as I don't doubt it has sheltered hundreds of others before. Have you looked round it ? It was certainly built for solidity, not show."



Berrie does so now, and agrees with him. Indeed it is an odd little place, square and low, built of huge stones, with narrow slits for windows pierced so as to enable those inside to look out to either point of the compass, a rude hearth-place where some ashes and fragments of burnt sticks are still lying, a hole for a chimney; and outside a kind of steep iron staircase or ladder leading to the flat stone roof. Berrie, however, is looking at the dead ashes, and remarks meditatively, "Signs of some poor belated shepherd last winter."

"Or rather of some festive tourist this summer," Randal puts in with a laugh. "I don't want to destroy the sentiment of the place; but are you not aware that this is a favourite spot for tourists' picnics? For myself I quite expected to find 'Arry' and 'Hemma' courting within, and Jack and

Jemima consuming cold mutton and spirits on the roof. As they are fortunately not here, and this storm seems likely to go on for some time, I venture to vote that we follow the fashion of the place and picnic here in their stead. I always take my lunch out with me," laying his hand on a kind of tin wallet he carries slung round his shoulders. "Are you equally prudent?"

"I was to-day," says Berrie cheerfully. She is quite easy and unconstrained with this man—partly because his own manner is so easy with her, and because he is after all "quite old;" partly because it is not her nature to feel shy or embarrassed with anyone. "I knew that I shouldn't be wanted till after lunch this morning: and I always get so *rabidly* hungry out of doors. Don't you?"

“ Well, not to a dangerous extent,” says Randal smiling. “ I’m afraid I’ve outlived the happy hungry time of life, and have had to go without food altogether for too long at different times to feel as ravenous between breakfast and supper as I did at your age. Have you come to that pitch now ? for, if so, we’d better begin at once.”

“ N—no, not yet ;” and Berrie colours a little, conscious that her lunch consists of a large captain’s biscuit hurriedly crammed into her pocket before starting ; and shrewdly suspecting both that his is of a more ornate character and that he will insist on her sharing it. “ I shall wait till the lightning is over. I couldn’t eat in a storm like this any how.”

“ You are not afraid of a thunderstorm, are you ? ”

“ I don’t know. I ought not to be, for

I am a North-country girl and have seen worse ones than this; but thunder and lightning always make me feel uncomfortable, and something like my grandmother, who invariably has the fire-irons hidden under the hearthrug, and makes her maid read the Psalms to her till it is over. There!" as a brilliant tri-forked flash lit up the leaden cloud at which they were gazing, and was followed by a more deafening peal than usual, "do you see that great fiery hand, as though God were angry with the world and threatening it! Isn't it enough to frighten one?"

"You have a more lively fancy than I. I can imagine a hand in yonder sparks of electricity; but not a God behind them," says Randal lightly; "nor, if I could, a fear of His threats either to harm the world or alter anything in it. One outlives other

childish things besides appetite when one comes to my age."

It is spoken in a half-bitter half-jesting tone; but he is vexed with himself the next moment for having even suggested his own sceptical notions to so young a girl, and is about to apologise for doing so, when she stops him by saying quite coolly:

"Ah, you are an Agnostic then. I am not."

"An *Agnostic*!" repeats Randal, adding to himself: "Good Heavens, what a little learned horror! Is she one of the Girton girls I've heard of, I wonder? I beg your pardon," he asks, rather mischievously, "but I don't think I quite understand the meaning of the word you used. *You* mean, I suppose, that I am an atheist?"

“Oh no,” cries Berrie eagerly; “I shouldn’t think you were that, because you said ‘*if*.’ If you had said there *was* no such being as God, and never had been, as a great many clever men do—— But you spoke as if you only doubted it. I like that better. Even Edla von Freilo—and she is cleverer than most men I have ever met—says doubt lies deeper than denial, and that she prefers to rest on an ‘*if*,’ so far as an overruling Supreme Cause is concerned. She is an Agnostic too.”

“Pray don’t say ‘*too*,’” says Randal, with a sudden though perfectly groundless repugnance to being classed with Fraulein von Freilo. “The plain fact is, I suppose, that I and your friend with the unpronounceable name are unfortunate enough to be freethinkers—people, by-the-way,

of whose views little girls like you never ought to have heard. She may call herself by some new-fangled name for that sort of thing, if she pleases ; but for my part, I prefer the old-fashioned one ; that is if every temporary frame of mind, neither entertaining to one oneself nor useful to anybody else, requires to be labelled with a name at all."

"Oh ! if it is only temporary——" says Berrie. She is quite grave and in earnest, so much so that she does not even hear the sarcasm in his tone (I don't think that Berrie was ever quick at detecting irony except in her grandmother, and that was practice). "Of course 'freethinker' sounds better ; only it is more pretentious. The new-fangled people are humbler ; for you see it requires some *mind*, doesn't it ?

to be able to think at all, and still more to think freely."

The girl does not mean to be rude. For the moment, indeed, she has forgotten him; and is only following out the train of thought he has suggested in her own mind, until Randal's hearty laugh and "Thank you!" recalls her to herself; whereupon she quits the subject in great confusion, and causes a diversion by going to the door and announcing that the sky is clearing to the east.

It is indeed. Already the raindrops are falling few and far between. A cool, not to say cold wind has got up, and is driving seaward the heavy masses of thunder-cloud overhead; while far, far away in the east there is a clear gap of azure light, with an undulating line of

gold lying athwart it, some distant range of mountains basking in the rays of the hidden sun. North, south, and west are, however, still shrouded in copper-coloured gloom and vapour. There is no sign of the distant chimneys of busy overgrown Barrow, and even the grand old Priory church in the vale of Cartmel at her feet is completely hidden in a kind of black mist which still swathes the whole valley of Grange ; and in which, from the heavy rumblings which proceed from it, Berrie can tell that the storm is still raging in those lower regions from which she has climbed. Hills and mountains are either hidden altogether or wrapped in leaden thunder-clouds. There is no glimpse of the Langdale Pikes, of Walna Scar, or the grim head of Coombe. Helvellyn, mightier than any, has con-

cealed the very fact of his existence ; and the rude wind which drives the storm-clouds between him and Berrie dashes a fresh shower of raindrops in her face as, having climbed up to the roof to get what view she can, she stands clutching the iron rail with both hands, and gazing earnestly out into the distance. Her tourist companion joins her there after a minute or two, and seeing how steadily, almost wistfully, her face is turned towards the north-east, says :

“I am afraid it is no use on a day like this to look for the mountains which guide-books say we are to see from here ; and that is not the direction in which the show giants lie any way.”

“I know,” Berrie answers shortly ; “I am not looking for *them*. I wish there were none at all out there. Not that I

could see it if it were so ; but it would be nice even to feel that one had climbed so high that there was nothing but air between oneself and home ; the very air one's own people are breathing blowing from us to them, and that we could see them if our eyes were only strong enough. Oh dear, I wish mine were ! ”

She says the last words to herself, so that Randal hardly catches them ; but he has seen a glimmer of something like tears in the bright dark eyes, and draws quietly back, saying nothing to her till she has brushed them away, and is ready to descend ; when, as he gives her a helping hand down the steep exposed staircase, he asks her :

“ Does your home lie out in that direction then ? ”

“ Yes, in Northumberland, a long way

off; but yet it seems tantalising to be in the north at all and not able to visit it.

"But why cannot you manage to do so? Would not your——" (Randal was going to say 'mistress,' but changes the word), "would not the old lady—your companion—like you to do so if she knew how much you wished it?"

"Oh no, it is not in the programme!" and she tries to speak lightly, perhaps because she is conscious of the touch of kindly interest in the stranger's tone. "We are 'doing' the Lakes. People don't 'do' Northumberland, you know. They only live there, and are so comfortable they never want to go wandering about like people in other parts. I don't believe my father has ever been farther from home than York in his life, and only twice there."


"And how is it that his daughter, being so enthusiastic on the subject, has yet departed from her father's habits?" asks Randal laughingly, but is punished for his jest by the immediate cloud which comes over Berrie's face, accompanied by a constraint which she has not shown before as she answers rather shortly :

"People can't always do what they like."

"Indeed I know that too well, and I beg your pardon for the silliness of the question. I was only joking, though ; for you don't need to remind me that it is not those who love their homes best that sit there idly while there are duties waiting for them abroad."

It is said with a sort of frank courtesy natural to the man before an unlucky fate turned him reckless and bitter : the courtesy

which would make it more painful to him to hurt the feelings of a beggar-woman than of a duchess ; but the word " duty " has brought a fresh train of thought to Berrie's mind, and made her turn to the door with a sudden recollection that it is some hours since she left home, and that if grand-mamma is wanting her while she dallies here chatting with a total stranger, her welcome back may not be altogether cheering. Outside, too, things are improving rapidly, and already the thunder-clouds have lifted from the green woods which hide Grange from view, and are rolling away seaward. Even the grass, laid so flat a few minutes back, is beginning to stand erect again, each tiny emerald blade bearing a diamond star upon its point. The gray old limestone crags, thrusting themselves upwards through the thin




coating of soil, glisten like polished marbles newly washed in the sunshine, and the orange and scarlet lichens on them flame like jewels. The air is full of the fresh sweet scent of damp earth and fragrant thyme, and the sound of water gurgling and rushing in baby cascades down steep places where a little before all was dry and sunbaked. Then a timid old sheep comes clattering up, and looks round with a long feeble "Baa—a!" as if inquiring after her missing family; and two seagulls, who have flown inland for shelter during the brief storm, wheel by high overhead, travelling oceanward again with shrill rejoicing cries.

"Why!—did you know it?—it is past one o'clock!" cries Berrie, looking at her watch. "I must hurry back at once, or I shall be wanted. Lunch? Oh no, thank

you. I can eat mine on the way. I—I must go now. Good-bye,” and with a little, schoolgirlish, not particularly graceful bow she is positively gone; and so swiftly, that almost before her companion has time to remonstrate, or rise from the big stone on which he has seated himself while opening his lunch-wallet, her light slim figure is already some yards distant, rapidly descending the hillside.


“And doubtless expecting me to follow and insist on accompanying her; probably already rehearsing the coquettish surprise and refusals proper to the occasion,” Randal mutters to himself as he looks quietly after her, and without altering his easy position, proceeds to unpack a parcel of sandwiches, a half-contemptuous smile on his lips the while. “She wouldn’t have rushed off in that suddenly assumed hurry other-



wise. Bah ! how early even children learn these pitiful games with which as women they try to tease and tantalise ! Wasted on me though ! You had need be fifty times more beautiful and enchanting than you ever will be, you poor little goose, to move me one inch by the cleverest of those played-out tricks. Unluckily for us both, 'tis 'a game which I *do* understand ;' and I doubt if even Vivian would succeed much in it to-day ; especially when I'm just sitting down to my lunch. Vivian—Humph ! I wonder if there is any truth in Frank's story ; if they did lie to her, confound them ! But what lies told of *her* would have made me false to her ? I would first have choked the man who uttered them, and then have gone to herself for the truth. The truth ! that's it, if one could only get at it ! And


then there's that damning thought that will creep in: should I ever have heard this tale if she were a rich widow and I only a younger son still, with nothing but my pay? I wish to Heaven poor Arthur had lived long enough to solve that question, if nothing else."

Berrie, meanwhile, happily unconscious of the thoughts in her late companion's mind, is hurrying swiftly homewards with no more prominent one in her own than the hope that her grandmother may not be wanting her. The way is easy enough to see before her now; but the short grass on these steep hillsides is slippery with moisture, and more than once her feet slide suddenly from beneath her and she gets an ignominious tumble, which makes her hope devoutly that Randal is not looking after her. It is still worse in



the woods, where every twig and leaf and bough are distilling raindrops which filter as fast through the green canopy as though the skies above were still raining. Some of the narrow paths have become regular waterfalls, and others are so slippery and clogged with wet that she can hardly pick her way along them. Her boots are laden with mud, her dress dragged with wet and stained with dank green moss. By the time she reaches the hotel she presents a tangled, muddy, crimson-faced appearance which makes her almost ashamed to sneak in at the open door ; and she is greeted by her grandmother with no measured indignation. "Upon my word, Barbara, it is a disgrace even to be connected with you," is the old lady's welcome as, tired and breathless, the girl almost stumbles against her in the corridor upstairs ; "and if there is one

thing I regret more than another it is my kindness in taking you about with me and indulging you as I have done. I wish now with all my heart that I had left you to be a governess ; for, thank Heaven, your father's vulgar name would have prevented then any of your own vulgarities from reflecting on me. But there ! you are too incorrigible and ungrateful for it to be of any use to speak to you. Go and change your things at once and then come to me. You knew how much I wanted to hear the end of that book, and that Parker can't read aloud without sniffing between every second word. If you had had the smallest good feeling you would have stayed at home when you heard I was not well, on the chance of my being able to listen to it. Make haste now at any rate."



So Berrie, silenced and confused by this storm of reproaches, gets no lunch at all, and spends the afternoon after her long tiring climb and downhill scramble, in reading aloud a novel of Ouida's till her voice, from fatigue and inanition, grows so hoarse and weak that Mrs. Henniker feels more annoyed with her than ever, and the day does not pass pleasantly for either. Also there is a slight alteration in the appearance of the dinner-table that evening which perhaps lends an unacknowledged shade to the sense of languor and chagrin with which the girl drops into her place. The chair on her left hand is vacant and remains so throughout the meal, for Randal Comyns has gone on to Windermere, carrying out the intention mentioned to his friend; and as she passes through the hall with

her grandmother on her arm she meets, though she does not know it, his port-manteau being carried off to the station to be forwarded to him.

as a man dispenses with the wearing a tight pair of boots or practising pretty civilities to his wife in the privacy of his own fire-side.

Probably because we are the most rigidly custom-ridden and conventional nation under the sun, we require in these days of growing expansiveness some regular and recognised outlet for those impulses of freedom which no centuries of habit or prejudice can wholly efface; and therefore it is that we betake ourselves year by year more happily and more numerous to pass a few weeks in hotels or boarding-houses quite as much for the greater liberty of action and manners, the pretermittting of useless and unpleasant social forms, and especially of that rabid ultra-exclusiveness so peculiarly the property of our unsociable nation, as for the unsavoury tasting "waters,"

the sea air, or picturesque country of which we are supposed to be in search.

Berrie has had good experience of this ; for she has passed the last eighteen months of her life, and the holiday weeks in one or two previous years, almost exclusively at hotels or fashionable boarding-houses in attendance on her grandmother, who, having paid for the girl's education, and held out vague hopes of leaving her "something" in her will, considers herself entitled to the entire possession and disposal of her granddaughter's time and services. Berrie's family consider it rather a grand thing for her : Dolly, her stepsister and three years her junior, being given, when out of temper, to speaking of her as "the fine lady of the family," and to resenting in a somewhat tempestuous manner the contrast between her own meagre schooling, imbibed from an

“establishment for young ladies” in the little town of Hexham, about four miles from her father’s farm, and her present quiet life in the latter rustic dwelling, with her elder sister’s expensive education at high-class schools in Brighton and Germany, followed by, what seems to Dolly, a round of continually new delights in the way of travel and adventure. Even the boys, rough and rude as they are with everybody else, treat Berrie with a certain respect and consideration when she makes a brief appearance among them as a creature of a superior order to the rest; and Mr. Brown, a gentle-spirited and long-suffering man by nature, both feels and avows that it is his duty to overlook every manner of slight or affront ever offered by his first wife’s mother to himself on the score of her “great kindness” to his eldest daughter.

“Eh, wife, but we’ll no be forgetting how gude she’s been to the lassie,” he says deprecatingly, when Mrs. Brown No. 2, a jolly hard-working woman with an honest pride of her own, urges him impatiently to “speak oot for himsel’ and give a bit o’ his mind to the auld leddy” after the receipt of one of Mrs. Henniker’s acidly insolent little notes to the poor man who, as a handsome young farmer, was once daring enough to let her daughter run away with him.

That daughter, willingly as she bent herself to her life with John Brown, was yet a “fine lady” to be revered as well as loved and petted all her short life, and her mother is a still finer one; and it’s a fine thing, so all the family think, for Berrie to go about with her and have nothing to do ro think of but how much she can enjoy herself, when all Mrs. Henniker had promised

was that she would give the girl education enough to fit her for a governess.


There are two sides, however, to most questions ; and on the whole, the present arrangement is not an entirely unprofitable one to the old lady, who gave up her London house when her daughter left her, and has had no settled home since. Two months of the year, indeed, are generally spent in London, at fashionable lodgings in Hyde Park Place ; but the remainder are passed in wandering about from one watering or seaside place to another ; and as she is always more or less of an invalid, suffering from slight attacks of rheumatism and dyspepsia, and being more than usually afflicted in her temper at such times, she finds it convenient enough to have a bright-witted, healthy girl always at hand to pay the

bills, read aloud, arrange plans of route, carry angry messages to offending landlords, talk French and German to foreign waiters, and (in especial) to serve as a safety-valve for the expenditure of all that surplus nagging and sarcasm against which even the best-trained of ladies'-maids are apt to turn restive.

This is Berrie's present life then ; and in the course of it she has gradually grown accustomed to becoming quite friendly, not to say intimate, with some people twenty-four hours after first setting eyes on them, and to bidding them a last farewell twenty-four hours later with equal ease and composure : as also to sitting opposite to others for three weeks at a stretch, and never noticing or being noticed on either side. It is a rather pleasant state of things in some respects, and

helps to make her more independent and self-reliant than a girl of her age would naturally be ; but it is a strange unhome-like life all the same, with a keen sense of loneliness and home-sickness running through it, that sharpest loneliness of all that one only finds in a crowd ; and sometimes (being of a warm and tender-hearted disposition under a somewhat rough crust) she is almost sorry when she comes across people of pleasant and reciprocative natures because she cannot help missing them when they depart, and taking a dislike to the next individuals who occupy their places.

“Barberry’s fancies,” her grandmother calls them contemptuously ; but for the most part that venerable lady leaves her alone to follow the said fancies pretty well unchecked, save as caprice or a passing




whim of interference may move her; and Berrie does follow them accordingly, with a happy innocence of many of those laws and *convenances* which might have made her freedom embarrassing to more carefully-nurtured young ladies. People are generally kind and courteous to her, and if they are not, theirs the blame, not hers! She need only keep out of their way, and that is no difficult task in a big hotel.

Still there are times when grandmamma does interfere with Berrie's "fancies;" as, for instance, whenever she has been irritated by anything the girl has done or left undone to offend her. Her favourite plan on these occasions is to punish the culprit by snubbing in her sharpest manner either the first persons who take any notice of her, or the poor child herself in their presence; and it is

for this reason that Berrie half rejoices when she sees that Randal's place at table is vacant. She has a feeling that she would greatly dislike to be snapped at before that keen-sighted contradictory person with the kind look in his eyes and the bitter ring in his voice ; and also that if grand-mamma were to launch an arrow at him she might have it sent back with a *recousse* into her own quiver.

Why, then, when breakfast-time comes and the place is still vacant, is she vaguely sorry? He has gone away of course. Probably he had no intention of staying. Could she have seen his letter to Frank St. Clair—once his school fag and now his most faithful friend—she would have known that he had not ; and, after all, he was only a deceptively nice person, young and handsome in his out-walking gear,




and bald and middle-aged indoors; and he had sneered, or something very like it, at the adored Edla von Freilo in their one chance talk together. She has come across numbers of people both more pleasant and more polite, and perhaps the next occupier of the chair may be one of them. Anyhow she makes up her mind to forget him, and doesn't find it very difficult.

“Ah, señorita, how the afternoon ees magnifico! too fine for stay in house. Why you not take a littel pasea—walk I would say, with permiso of the señora your duenna, eh?”

It is the little Spaniard, whose admiration for Berrie's Scotch-terrier head seems to have increased during the last two or three days; and who, relieved from Randal's spectacled glare, has taken to haunting her footsteps, and addressing her when-

ever he can find an opportunity. Berrie knows how to take care of herself very well in general, and finds it easy enough to repel obtrusive people of her own nationality ; but there is something in the calmer and more unabashed audacity of this little smiling foreigner which is less easy to quell or rebuff. When she stares loftily at him he nods and smiles. When she answers him sharply he smiles more. When she doesn't answer him at all he still smiles and sits down beside her as though she had mutely invited him so to do, and there was some private understanding between them ! It is aggravating, horrible. She would like to box his ears, only that even her ignorance of the laws of society is not so dense as to allow her to go that length ; and the worst of it is that she has no escape or refuge.



Grandmamma has given up her private sitting-room on the score of economy, and, having an attack of dyspepsia on, has not come downstairs till late in the afternoon since the day of the thunder-storm; and Berrie cannot sit in her own bedroom because, being a lively girl, she would go melancholy mad moped up in a tiny back room with no view, no books, and the sun pouring in on it half the day. There are no ladies among the company either, with whom she could easily find a refuge. The clergyman and his wife are gone on to Windermere, so, to her joy, are the publican and his wife. The spinster sisters remain, but they are rather averse than sympathetic towards Berrie; and there is a large party of noisy loud-talking Americans, the women as usual very much over-

dressed and far more voluble than the men, and all on such equal terms of intimacy that the query as to which are brothers and sisters, or husbands and wives, or merely friends, or whether they may not all belong to some patriarchal family from Utah, is a perpetual and rather exciting mystery to Berrie. They, on their side, take no notice of her; but regarding themselves as in a foreign country, behave very much as we English do in continental hotels, either ignoring the natives altogether, or commenting freely on their manners, customs, and appearance, and comparing them unflatteringly with the same things in "Amurrica," as they are pleased to designate that portion of the North American continent called the United States, or rather the particular little state

in it from which they happen to hail.

Poor Berrie feels more alone than usual. She has not dared to take one of her long rambles since the objurgations she received on that Hampsfell day; and if she goes out for a turn in the garden or anywhere near, the little foreigner sticks to her as closely as a fly to a jam-tart. Now he has even invaded the drawing-room, where she has taken refuge, and leans against the window near her, staring into her face with his big treacle-coloured eyes till she feels more than ever inclined to try that box on the ears for which her fingers feel tingling.

"I do not want to go out, thank you," she says, rising with flushed cheeks, "and I do not like being spoken to by

strangers. It is not the custom in this country." And then she hurries from the room and upstairs, encountering Parker just outside her grandmother's door.

"Oh Parker, isn't grannie ready to come down yet?"

"No, Miss Barbara; and I don't believe she will be any how till dinner-time. Her lunch didn't agree with her, and now she's taking a doze; so I wouldn't disturb her if I was you."

"But, Parker, I want to know if I may go out. There's a little man below will talk to me, and I can't stay up in my room. If I could get into the woods I'd soon shake him off. Do you think she would mind?"

"Lor' no, miss! why should she? She was only a bit put out the other day

because she wanted that book finished. You just do as you like;" and thus encouraged, Berrie flies to her own room, ties on her hat, and glides quietly down the wide staircase to the hall, peering over the banisters at every step lest her persecutor may be waiting for her below. There is no sign of him there, but he may be still in the drawing-room, or on the terrace in front; so she dare not make her exit by the hall-door, but creeps out into the garden through a French window in the long dining-room, much astonishing one or two waiters as she flashes by them in the latter, and considerably endangering the construction of an unapproachable edifice in table-napkins by her unexpected appearance. Little enough Berrie thinks of them. Her mind is only bent on escape, and

she hardly draws a breath freely till, having hurried through the garden under cover of the shrubbery, she finds herself in the little wood already spoken of.

There she is safe. Not quite though! There was certainly someone at an angle of one of the paths as she passed; and even now, as she climbs the narrow densely-bowered track before her, she fancies she can hear a crackling among the leaves and boughs as of someone in her rear.

The idea lends her wings. To be caught in the wood would be far worse than in the hotel parlour; and she neither lingers for view or flower till she has come out into a lane, scudded across a couple of ploughed fields, smashed—somehow, and greatly to the detriment of her nice blue linen dress—through a tolerably tangled

hedge, and plunged into the leafy shade of a second wood, one where the very light is green as it filters through a canopy of leaves on to a closely-woven carpet of wood-sorrel and ivy, so soft and thick that her small feet sink into it at each step they take.

Berrie has a dim idea that this wood is private property; for she has never been able to discover any approach to it, save through the afore-mentioned hedge or a gentleman's barnyard on the opposite side of the hill. Some of the steep little paths in it, too, have been made easier by being fashioned into rude steps; and on the crest of the hill there is a cleared space, in the centre of which there is a kind of monument or cairn with a date on it.

For these reasons, Berrie, whose morals

with regard to private property and trespassing are of the loosest, has an especial fancy for the spot, which she has coolly christened St. Barbara's Hill; and where she frequently takes her books or sketching materials, with a security from interruption which she is not able to feel in more frequented places.

Alas for that security at present, for it is founded on sand even more shifting than that of the bay at her feet! As after a leisurely climb she emerges on to the cleared space above described, the first thing she sees is a man standing by the cairn, with his face turned towards her, as though awaiting her!

It may not be the little Spaniard. In that one hasty horrified glance Berrie could not have sworn to the fact, but she has time to see that, whoever he is, he is clad

all in heather-grey ; and, having noticed at breakfast that her small enemy had got himself up *à l'Anglais*, in an entire suit of that colour, she has no doubt of his identity, and turns abruptly on her heel, with a fervent if unspoken prayer that he may not have had time enough to recognise her and follow, before she has succeeded in gaining a hiding-place where she knows he will never be likely to discover her.

There are lucky and unlucky days, however, in everybody's life ; and apparently this is one of the latter for Berrie. Unfortunately, her foe is as quick-sighted as herself. He not only follows, but calls to her to stop, and as—ashamed to appear to be running away—she pauses, hot and scarlet with indignation, on the very brow of the hill, which on this side breaks away

abruptly in an almost perpendicular descent, she hears him cry out, in still more imperative tones :

“ Have a care, child, or you will be over the cliff ! There is no path there.”

CHAPTER VI.

BERRIE ADVISES MARRIAGE.

“I REALLY beg your pardon,” says Randal Comyns, as Berrie turns round and faces, not the little Spaniard, after all, but the far more redoubtable-looking personage before-named; “but is anything the matter?”

He asks this, lifting his grey cap, with a look of cool surprise not altogether unfounded, so fierce and glowing with contemptuous indignation are the little brown face and bright dark eyes confronting him; but the anger and scorn

die out of them, even as they meet his look of amazement, and Berrie seems to tone down all at once from an enraged little beauty to a small tame dark-complexioned girl, with only a rapidly-fading spot of colour in either cheek, and a decided look of relief in her eyes, to mark her late excitement.

“ Oh, was it only *you*, then ? ” she says, with a long-drawn breath which tells him plainly that someone else must have been frightening or annoying the girl to no small extent. Yet he cannot help answering her ironically.

“ *Only* me, certainly. Did you expect to meet anyone else ? I am very sorry to have startled you, as I seem to have done ; but I assure you it was quite unintentional. Indeed, though we parted rather abruptly the other day, I was

not conscious of having offended to the extent of obliging you to cast yourself headlong over a precipice at the sight of me."

"Oh, but I did not——" begins Berrie, but is interrupted.

"You are exactly five inches from the edge of it now. If you would not mind coming a little way from it, I will give you my word not to come a step nearer *you*. I really am quite harmless."

"And I am quite safe where I am; but it was not you from whom I was running away," says Berrie, colouring with a painful sense of having made herself ridiculous, and feeling a necessity for explanation. "I—I thought you were that little Spaniard, and I was only getting out of the way."

“The ‘little Spaniard’ would doubtless feel equally far from being flattered at either fact,” says Randal, smiling grimly. “I forget, however—— Didn’t I hear you telling a fat clerical gentleman that you always do try to ‘get out of the way’ of other people in your walks? In that case I ought to apologise again for having foiled your endeavour this afternoon; but I assure you it was purely unintentional, as I only came back to the place an hour ago, and never dreamt of your being still in it.”

“And he is not with you then?” asks Berrie, totally disregarding the uncomplimentaryness of this avowal, as she peers through the bushes in Randal’s rear.

“‘He’ certainly is not, if you mean the small Spanish gentleman with whose poetical language you seemed so familiar

the only time I saw him," Randal answers pointedly ; but is sorry the next moment, because of the distressed blush in the girl's face.

Poor Berrie ! she could laugh at being compared to the hotel-keeper's dog, when she thought no one understood the comparison but herself ; but she is young enough to feel sorely mortified at the thought that this man had listened to and perhaps enjoyed it also.

"Yes, he said I was like a Scotch terrier," she says, trying to speak all the more coolly and unconcernedly because of her confusion, and meeting Randal's eyes bravely. "There was no harm in that. I daresay I am ; and *I* think Scotch terriers are nice."

"Some Scotch terriers are very nice," says Randal gravely ; "but I don't suppose

any young lady ever quite came up to them. Nevertheless the comparison was impertinent—to both; and if the dog had been a linguist, I daresay he would have resented it too. Do you mean, however,” and for the moment he drops his jesting tone and speaks soberly, “that the little man has been annoying you?”

“Oh, only by following me about and speaking to me. I don’t like it; and grandmamma is not well and can’t come downstairs; so when I came through the trees and took you for him——”

“You did the most foolish thing you could, and ran away!” says Randal, smiling kindly. “I’m afraid you are a very young lady after all; yet I shouldn’t have thought that little misery, however impertinent, worth breaking your neck over a cliff

for. I would far rather have broken his for you. I've no doubt he deserves it."

"But I wasn't going to break mine," Berrie answers happily. "He might have thought so, as you do; but I was quite safe. I know this place."

"And all its secret caverns and hiding-places? Well I, at any rate, won't drive you to them at present," and Randal lifts his cap again in farewell; then hesitates a moment, and adds in simple good-natured earnest, "unless it will be a satisfaction to you to know that I am strolling about somewhere in the neighbourhood, and that your small tormentor shall not be allowed to come within a quarter of a mile of you. I am not laughing now," as he meets her quick inquiring glance, and marks with some remorse the touch

of wistfulness in it. Berrie sees that he is not, and is grateful; so grateful, that she acts with what she considers unexampled generosity.

"Thank you," she says warmly, "you are very kind; but I am not so silly as all that; and I don't want to drive you away from here. You may see my hiding-place if you like. There is a regular little path to it at the other end; but it is quite easy to get down to it here," and she begins to scramble downwards as she speaks.

I have said, I think, that this hill stands up abruptly on the side facing the bay, a rugged wall of rock unbroken by any incline or path however steep; but by holding to a bough here and a crag there, Berrie easily climbs, and swings herself down to a broad ledge of rock

about twelve or fourteen feet from the summit, which forms a natural terrace encircling the crest of the height. This terrace is partly overhung by the rough wall of limestone towering above it, and from the brow above tumbles a tangled curtain of straggling blackberry shoots, with their spined crimson stems and rough green leaves, bryony glittering with white trumpet-shaped blossoms, and winding its delicate tendrils round everything in its reach; and small deep-veined ivy; while the path itself is carpeted with orchids, wood-sorrel, and rose-campions, forming a soft tapestry of white, pink, and green, and fenced in from the edge of the cliff by a kind of natural hedge of alder, guelder-roses and burnet-roses, the latter still (in this "north countrie," where spring comes late and blends with summer)

showered over with scented scarlet bloom ; and all of which tumble outwards and downwards to clothe the rugged face of the cliff below with a living garland of leaves and flowers.

A lovely rock-path indeed for a little maid's eyes to have discovered, and a lovely view from there to greet them ; for below them is spread out the huge expanse of Morecambe Bay, blue as a turquoise, and glittering with diamonds from beach to horizon ; while at her feet nestle the church and village of Grange, with, to the right, the sunny slopes lying between it and ancient Cartmel ; and, farther still, Humphrey's Head running far out into the blue waters, over which it casts a dark shadow.

There is a warm glow of sunshine over everything ; wood-pigeons are cooing drow-

sily in the tops of the trees far below them ; gulls skimming and circling about in the clear air above ; little brown or white sailed boats dotted about here and there over the harbour ; now and then a long black line of smoke in the distance from a passing steamer. All is still, and bright, and fair ; so fair that, involuntarily, Randal draws a long sigh of pleasure, which makes Berrie turn round to look at him, thinking he is tired.

“Wait a minute,” she says, “there is a seat here,” and turning an angle of the cliff shows him a rudely-fashioned bench under the shadow of the rock before adding, “there, now you know my refuge. Don’t you think it a pretty one ? And do you think that little Spaniard would find me here ?”

“I hope not,” Randal answers devoutly,

as he seats himself beside her; "but do you know you are rather an uncommon young lady? Most of your sex are averse to running away from society; and especially from their admirers."

"So should I be, I suppose, if I admired them," says Berry bluntly. "There is nothing I like so much as being in pleasant places with people I am fond of. That is why I come here. I write nearly all my letters home on this bench, and try to fancy I am talking to them."

"You are very fond of 'home,' I see," says Randal, looking at her, and thinking that the bright dark eyes had something very witching in them when they take that wistful expression. "Are you regretting you ever had to leave it?"

"Not for some things. I know I am better away; for of course it's one less to

keep, and that's something to be considered," Berrie answers calmly. "Besides, there are plenty without me, and I am the eldest; so, as my stepmother says, I ought to be trying my wings, especially now that Dolly is old enough to take my place at home."

"Dolly is your sister?"

"Yes; though you'd never guess it. She is as fair as a bryony flower, and as lovely. I never saw anyone prettier than Dolly."

"Seen through a sister's loving spectacles," says Randal, smiling; but Berrie fires up on the instant.

"No; certainly not. A person must be a fool who can't tell a beautiful thing from an ugly one because he is fond of it. Tom, my eldest brother, is awfully plain—really plain, you know—his nose is all on one side, and he's had the smallpox too; but

I like him best of all the boys ; and Josh, who is the handsomest, least."

"*All!* How many are there of you?" Randal cannot help being amused by these youthful confidences, as much as by the girl's petulance and impetuosity. After all, there is not very much amusement in his life just now.

"Eight—we are eight," says Berrie, paraphrasing Wordsworth, and counting deliberately on her fingers, so as to make no mistakes. "Four boys—Tom, and Josh, and Ernie, and Philip ; and four girls—Me, and Dolly, and Louie, and Bubbles. Quite an army of us, isn't it?" looking at the eight slender sunburnt fingers spread out on her knee ; "but Loo and Ernie are twins, so we generally count them as one ; and Bubbles is only a baby. She's not two yet."

"And you are barely twenty, I suppose,"

thinks Randal to himself. "Poor father and mother! I suppose in those cases the sooner the young birds can fly away from the nest and make room for others the better. And so," he adds aloud, "with such a large home-party you must have plenty of letters to write. You are a lucky girl; though, indeed, I remember in my young days, long enough ago now, thinking home-letters rather a bore. At present I have no one left to write them to except my poor old governor, who is blind, and can't bear me; so I am rightly punished."

"Can't bear you! But why not?" cries Berrie with sudden compassion in her eyes. Mr. Brown happens to be very fond of his children, and the idea that parents are not invariably so is slightly startling to her.

"Oh, simply because my elder brother, who

was his favourite, chanced to die two years ago, poor fellow ; so every time the governor hears my name he is reminded of the fact that had I been considerate, or fate more kind, I might have done so instead. No, don't look pitiful over me, child, I had my due share of spoiling while my mother—bless her!—was alive ; and even now I've a friend or two in odd corners of the world who'll never refuse me a kindly hand-grip when I turn up to claim it. One of them, an old African chief, went so far in affection for me that he positively offered me the pick of three among his wives if I'd only pitch my tent alongside of him for the remainder of my days."

"That *was* a generous friend!" says Berrie, laughing. "I wonder you resisted the temptation."

"So might I if I had been *quite* sure

of the purity of the friendship. He may, however, have rather wanted to get rid of them, you know. Some men have that feeling with regard to their wives."


"Bad men; or men with bad wives. Phil says a wife and a watch are things men don't get tired of."

"Phil's comparison is not inappropriate; but both wives and watches have tongues which run on pretty continuously unless there is something wrong with either. Both, too, are sometimes a little slow, and sometimes—rather often indeed—not a little fast; but the wife's tongue is louder than the watch's, and when *she* goes fast she beats any watch under the sun!"

"You forget one point of resemblance," said Berrie quickly, "you wear both very near your heart. Have you got a watch there now?"

"I have," Randal answers, with an inquiring look.

"Then I guess you want a wife too. You'd better make haste and get one. I don't think you'd talk so bitterly if you did." She gives the advice without a shadow of a blush—indeed, in somewhat of a motherly and patronising fashion; although Randal, rather startled at such a very suggestive speech coming from a young lady to a single gentleman, turns a keen glance on her to see how she means it; but there are no ulterior intentions in Berrie's mind, she having spoken in perfect good faith as she might have done to another woman; and being happily unconscious of how pretty she is looking at the moment with her bright dark face, illumined by the crimson light of the afternoon sun, standing out against a back-



ground of grey rock, and the silky tendrils of her short curly hair waving about her brow. Even her eyes look deeper and more liquid than usual ; and her small ungloved hands have fallen into a graceful childish pose clasped round one knee.

It flashes across Randal's mind, as he looks at her, what an anomalous position his is at that moment, seated in a romantic spot out of sight or ken of the world, engaged in a *tête-à-tête* discussion on matrimony with a quaint little maiden whose very name he does not know, whom he has only seen twice before in his life, and may never see again. Yet even he, cynic and man of the world as he is, can hardly doubt the childlike honesty in Berrie's eyes and mouth ; so he only says to tease her :

“ You suppose I am *not* married then ?


What could put such an idea in your head?"

"I didn't think you would speak in that way if you were; especially when you were away from your wife."

"Why, that's my only chance of speaking the truth about her. I mightn't dare to do it if she were present, I own."

"Oh, then you don't love one another?" says Berrie coolly. "Well, I hope *my* husband will love me; and I don't think—I shouldn't like to think he would speak so of me when *I* was away from him." She is so much in earnest, and believes so entirely that he is equally so in whatever he chooses to say, that Randal feels remorseful over his little jest, and hastens to explain it away.

"I don't love her certainly, because your first supposition was right. There is no



such person in existence ; and, for your sake, I hope very heartily that your husband may be of a different mind to me on the subject of wives. I almost fancy (with a momentary glance at the small face with its tender upward curve of soft round cheek and throat) that he will."

"I should hope so certainly," says Berrie calmly, and with such evident blindness or indifference to the compliment implied in Randal's last words, that he is constrained to answer sarcastically :

"I see that *you* have quite made up your mind as to getting a husband ! Have you also fixed on the individual, since you seem so perfectly confident as to his general submissiveness ? But perhaps you 'north-country' young ladies settle all these little matters among yourselves, without requir-

ing the inferior sex to have any voice in the question ? ”

He expected to make her blush, and he does—that intense, crimson blush which always seems to take away Berrie’s voice and breath, and almost bring the tears to her eyes ; but he is punished for it, for she rises quietly, and answers in quite a different tone from that former girlish one in which she has been prattling :

“I have shown you my seat, and now I think I must go back to the hotel. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, and thank you,” says Randal, secretly much disappointed by this sudden move, though he will not own it. “But will you not let me walk back with you, as I am going there too, and perhaps you may meet your little Spaniard on the way ? ”

"Thank you, but I don't much care if I do. I can take very good care of myself—always," says Berrie, so decidedly that he feels impelled to say:

"I see you can, but I hope you did not think *I* meant to be impertinent to you just now."

"I don't know what you *meant*, I think you were," the girl answers, with that utter want of compromise peculiar to her.

"Impertinent?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry you think so, and I hope you will allow me to apologise sincerely for having given you cause for such an opinion," says Randal gravely, and lifting his cap. It is simply a courteous action in accompaniment to the apology, but Berrie seems to take it as leave-taking, for she gives him a little shy bow in answer,

with just a flicker of a smile to signify that her wrath is appeased, and turning, goes quietly down the narrow path with a step which this time does not make even him think that she wishes to be followed.

Yet somehow the rocky ledge with its carpet of flowers and canopy of waving creepers looks dull and dark when she is gone, and some of the brightness seems even to have faded out of the summer sea. Randal sits meditating for a moment with a strangely gloomy brow, and then rising pulls himself together with a shake, and returns to the hotel by a different route to that which she has taken.

That day he is back in his old place at dinner, and Berrie betrays her consciousness of the fact by a slight start and rush of colour, as, coming in rather late with

her grandmother, she sees him in the chair at her left hand. She avoids looking at him, however, and Randal takes no more notice of her than the courtesies of the table (as to which he is always punctilious) require. By-and-by, however, Berrie does not quite know how, he and Mrs. Henniker get into conversation, and the old lady finding out, as she does in about three minutes, that Randal is both a gentleman and a travelled man, becomes quite beaming and affable, and after that almost compels Berrie to flatten herself *into* the back of her chair while she thrusts her wrinkled chin and flower-crowned head forward so as to talk across her granddaughter to this new acquaintance.

“A man *in* society, my dear,” as she tells the girl afterwards, “and who has evidently been everywhere, and knows the

world and its ways. It's quite a pleasure to come across anyone of the sort. I really enjoyed my chat with him; and he rather spoke as if he intended staying here some days. I wonder if he will?"

Berrie does not know, does not seem to care; will not own even to herself that she is wondering the same. What is it to her whether he comes or goes; a rude sarcastic man, who presumes on his bald head and her youthful stupidity to say impertinent things to her, positively to make game of her! She is quite glad—at least she feels she *ought* to be quite glad—to remember how she set him down; and he certainly felt it, for the brief word or two which they have exchanged during dinner have been of the coldest and most constrained order; and from his whole manner he evidently considers that the

acquaintance between them is at an end. Quite right that it should be so; and yet she is conscious of a thrill of pleasure at her grandmother's suggestion of his staying on at the hotel with them, and is exceedingly angry with herself for it. She is very amiable, however, says no word of his shortcomings to check Mrs. Henniker's eulogies; and when the old lady complains of sleeplessness later on, is very tender and sympathetic, and sits by the bedside patiently reading aloud till long past midnight; not being too tired even then to give a kiss to Dolly's photograph, and read over again her last letter from Phil (fortunately not a long one) before going to bed.

That same evening, and while Berrie is upstairs with her grandmother, Randal Comyns strolls into the hall, and, taking

up the visitors'-book, turns over the pages till he comes to a couple of names bracketed together—"Mrs. Dalton-Henniker and Miss Brown."

"Miss Brown! *Brown*. Good heavens, what a name! and yet I know that's the number. 'Miss Brown.' Short, unformed, and unpolished; daughter of a poor man with more children than he can keep, and poor relation and companion to a painted old harridan who makes a man shudder to look at her. I wonder what Vivian would say if she had seen me receiving advice on matrimony from the ingenuous lips of such a young person. Ha! that's just the word she would use—'*young person*,'—and I can see the slightly elevated brows and droop of her proud little mouth as she says it. The governor, too—there would be something to study in his face


if one told him I was interested in a *Miss Brown*. Am I, by-the-way? Not that I know of. Then what brought me back here to-day? Heaven knows! except that I don't like offending people wantonly; and be the little girl whom she may, she has a right to the respect she exacts. Aye, and I like her for exacting it. What a pity one can't give her a hundred pounds and send her back to the rustics she is so homesick for, poor child! I would if I were thirty years older. Well, I never thought she was a princess in disguise, but — *Miss Brown!* What an — impossible name!" and then he, too, goes to bed with a short impatient laugh at some thought which he will not stop to analyse.

CHAPTER VII.

“IT COULDN'T HAVE BEEN YOU!”

“BUT what made you come back at all?”

They are sitting on the top of a hill, Randal Comyns and Berrie. It is three or four days after the evening last recorded, but somehow he is still at Grange, lingering on from day to day, and the coolness between him and Barberry seems to have patched itself over and been forgotten. Anyhow there is no sign of it at present. Indeed, he has made himself so agreeable to Mrs. Henniker that she already greets him when they meet with



the cordiality of an old friend, and apparently identifying her feelings with her granddaughter, he has taken advantage only to-day of his position to ask Berrie formally if she will come for a walk with him as soon as breakfast is over, and she has agreed, without any hesitation.

To speak the truth, he hardly expected that she would; not, at anyrate, without a good deal of persuasion, and he made the proposal at first in a laughing tone, which might have been taken for either jest or earnest; but as Berrie accepted it at once in the latter light, and evidently saw nothing out of the way in it, he was well pleased at his own audacity, and congratulated himself on having secured a bright, pretty girl for a companion, even while, manlike, he could not help muttering to himself :

"I never thought she would, though. North-country farmers must bring up their daughters pretty freely, and I suppose the old woman there thinks it all right, or little Miss Berrie would at anyrate have referred it to her. Fancy Vivian, at her age, dreaming of such a thing as wandering about the country with a man of whom she knew nothing! Why I could hardly get her to myself for ten minutes, even after we were engaged. Well, it's a good thing for me that this child is different; and for her that I'm a steady, middle-aged old fellow, and not likely to take advantage of her trust in human nature. She ought to be better taken care of though, for there are plenty of scamps in this world, and she is pretty—in a way."

But care is just the thing Mrs. Henniker

never thinks of Berrie's needing. As long as the girl does what is required of her, is always at hand when wanted, dresses just nicely enough not to be discreditable to her aristocratic relative, and does not make herself too prominent in society, the old lady leaves her alone to do pretty well what she pleases, and troubles her head very little as to what that pleasure may be. If she were to misbehave herself, or do anything disgraceful indeed, then she would be sent home to Farmer Brown at once; but as to petty imprudences, or the danger of so young a creature getting entangled in ill-placed friendships, or having her affections ensnared by unprincipled people, Mrs. Henniker simply shrugs her shoulders, and asks no questions. Berrie is not a child, the old woman says to herself; if

she were, she would have left her at home a little longer. Also, the girl's universally put-forward position as a penniless dependent on a relative in no way inclined to make a favourite of her is not likely to tempt poverty-stricken adventurers into seeking an alliance with her; while, were she by any chance fortunate enough to attract a man of wealth or position, so much the better; she would not be interfered with. Indeed, in that case Mrs. Henniker might even lend her a little assistance towards playing her cards well, should the girl's unaided genius be insufficient for the purpose; and having done the benevolent grand-parent with dueunction, would look for her reward in a comfortable home and welcome, whenever she might require either, at her granddaughter's establishment. So far Mrs.

Henniker had thought out the matter, and settled it in her own mind when she first decided on taking her rebellious daughter's child as a companion. There remained the alternative that poor Berrie might be led into losing her heart to someone without the will or power to marry; but of this the old lady did not choose to think. Perhaps she had private reasons for feeling that she would not be altogether displeased, even for the girl's own sake, were such to be the case. Girls' fancies were never very deep, and one was sometimes useful for driving out another.

All the same, Mrs. Henniker is quite aware of the charm which, hardly acknowledged to himself, keeps Randal Comyns at Grange, and, perhaps, builds upon it more securely than he would at

all approve; but it is characteristic of the old society woman to find out everything about everybody, and while Berrie is still cheerfully ignorant of the very name or calling of the man with whom she has grown quite intimate, Mrs. Henniker has even got possession of an old card of his, bearing the inscription:

"RANDAL C. COMYNS, CAPT. R.M.,
Jnn. United Service Club, Pall Mall;"

and by consulting the sacred pages of Burke, without whom she would as soon think of travelling as another woman without her Bible, has identified the gentleman as the only surviving son of Sir Comyn Comyns, Bart., of Dingleberry Hall, Co. Norfolk.


"A man of fortune and family," the old lady mutters to herself. "An

excellent thing for Berrie if she is only lucky enough to catch him, and decidedly not a person to be snubbed. I shall let them quite alone a little bit longer, and then just pull the——What's that you're saying, Parker? Talking to Miss Berrie in the hall! And what if the gentleman is? Anyone whom *I* choose to recognise has a perfect right to speak to my granddaughter, and I should hope Miss Berrie has sufficient discretion and knowledge of the world to be trusted to act as a young lady in good society should, without any need of supervision."

But that is just what Berrie has not. How, indeed, should she have learnt any knowledge of the world, or society either, reared in a north-country farm and a German school, and transplanted thence

to her rambling life with her grandmother—now in one place, now in another, never forming a real friendship or a lasting intimacy even with the nicest of those with whom she is thrown, seeing life only in its most bizarre and Bohemian aspects, and everywhere left to the guidance of her own instincts and those few principles which may have been instilled into her in early childhood.


It is fortunate for her that both these happen to be good and healthy; for Berrie is no angel, no "creature far too pure and good for human nature's daily food"—only a quick-witted, sensible girl, "canny," as the Scots say, with naturally strong, wholesome instincts as to right and wrong, and a hatred of shams, which have more than once served unconsciously to keep her from evil, and enabled her



to distinguish veneer from solid mahogany. Also she has, despite her freedom of manners and outspokenness, an occasional spice of that inborn dignity which may be found as often among the peasant-girls in an Irish cabin as among the women who "sit in palaces, and are clothed in fine linen." It is this which makes her prone to resent anything that she judges to be a liberty, and to retreat from the free-and-easy advances of the middle-class "'Arrys," so often to be met with at every watering-place. But, alas! it is no assistance to her as to the social laws and etiquettes of Upper-ten society, of which she has had no personal experience. Instinct tells her, indeed, that Randal is a gentleman, just as it tells a dog to wag his tail to an honest man; and her grandmother having gone out of

her way to show marked approval of him, it never occurs to Berrie that there can be any reason why she should not do likewise, or, that in walking and talking with him whenever Mrs. Henniker leaves her at liberty, she is in any way sinning against the *convenances*, or doing differently from other young ladies in society.

On the present occasion, they have climbed to the top of a steep, wooded hill not far from Grange, a spot where the solid rock has thrust itself through the thin soil and overtopped the trees which cluster round its base like the bald head of an old man gleaming whitely above a fringe of scrubby hair. It is all rock up here—a rugged table of grey limestone, channelled with the furrows of prehistoric watercourses, crusted with



lichens, grey, and green, and orange, with wild thyme and heather softening every sharp outline in its face, and the pretty mountain maiden-hair and hart's-tongue fern springing from the deep rifts in its split and rugged surface—an island of rock, with all around a sloping sea of tree-tops; feathery, emerald-tipped larches, and the sturdy blue-green bristles of Scotch pines stretching away to the stony crest of a second hill, the counterpart of this; and on the other side farther still, in a succession of gentle, wind-tossed undulations, to a shimmery opaline stripe, a purple, jagged line of summer sea and distant mountain.

Berrie has cast herself down very comfortably on a little shady patch, carpeted with soft thyme, under a jutting crag, her round arms crossed behind her head, so

as to form a cushion for it, a tiny sprig of heather between her teeth, and her eyes half closed in restful enjoyment after the heat and fatigue of the upward climb. It is an attitude more suggestive of ease than elegance, and there is an interval between the flounce of her short white gown and the strong lace-up boots which case her trim little feet, of which she is, happily, more unconscious than Randal, who sits on a large stone close by, his knees drawn up to his chin, and his hat, with his white puggaree, tilted over his eyes, looking gravely down on her. He answers her question, however, with a laugh which sends the gravity away.

"Well, to tell the truth, I came back by accident. I didn't *mean* to do so at all."

Berrie looks at him inquiringly, the

sprig of heather being somewhat obstructive to speech at the moment.

“You remember that morning on the Hampsfell?” Randal continues lightly. “After you left me I walked on till I found myself in a road, which turned out to be the Lindale one. Just then the Windermere coach happened to come up, with a vacant place on it. I was tired, jumped up, and went on to Lowood, a pretty little hotel on the banks of the lake, where I got a bed, and telegraphed here for my luggage. Meant to stay there, but—*que voulez vous?* There were no less than five newly-married couples in the house, each and all in that state of blushing, or unblushing spooneyness, which made it positively improper, not to say unsafe, for anything not wearing a brand-new wedding-ring to be within a dozen

yards of them, and obliged one, in common decency, to avoid the garden altogether, cough for five minutes at the drawing-room door, and sneeze for three at the dining-room, before turning the handle. I fled next morning, with the full intention of going right up North—to the Orkneys—to try the wild-fowl shooting, and get out of the way of spick-and-span port-manteaus and high-heeled shoes; but, happening to hear someone at the station talking about a wonderful collection of old books in the Priory church at Cartmel here, I came back to see them; and in returning from there across these hills encountered a certain young lady, and got well snubbed—first, for daring to meet her at all, and next, for making some innocent remark. *Voilà tout!* Are you satisfied?"

"Not exactly," says Berrie, laughing; "for, after all, that doesn't explain why you came back to the hotel, instead of going on to the Orkneys, as you intended."

"Oh, I had a curiosity to have another look at a little Spanish gentleman, whom I had met on my first visit here; and, having had it, I stayed. It's always easier to stay in a place than go on, you know. And now, Miss Brown, having answered all your questions, may I ask what is puzzling you, and making you pucker up your brows so funnily?"

"*You*," says Berrie bluntly. Then disregarding her companion's politely lifted eyebrows, and sitting upright as she speaks, "I can't understand you at all, and it does puzzle me. Do you *never* have a reason for anything you do, or think about it beforehand?"

"Now and then, perhaps; but as it is generally a very bad reason, and thinking about it inclines me to do something else as quickly as possible, it is not an invariable practice of mine."

"And you are never obliged to do anything? You can go through life amusing yourself, and just doing what comes easiest, or going where the last whim leads you?"

"Exactly. You couldn't have described it better. A jolly sort of life, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I never tried it, and I never knew anyone else before who did; but . . . you don't *look* jolly," says Berrie, gravely. Her bright dark eyes are looking straight into his as she speaks; and for the moment the mocking smile dies off his lips, and one infinitely sad comes over them.

"Don't I? Thank God that it's a life

you never did try then, and pray that you never may," he answers bitterly.

Berrie is not compassionate, however, and takes him up on the instant.

"I thought you said you didn't believe in a God? Where is the use of praying to one then?"

"You are a quick-witted young lady," says Randal, smiling, but annoyed. "Pray do not let us get into another theological argument. It was only a figure of speech." But he knows he has been inconsistent, and Berrie sees he is vexed, and, being indulgent, answers soothingly:

"Well, anyhow, I suppose most people, hard-working people especially, would think you a very fortunate man. It is something to be able to go where one likes, and do what one likes; and I suppose you have money enough for it—plenty, haven't you?"

Again he lifts his eyebrows, but very slightly, and answers, laconically: "Plenty."

"Ah!" says Berrie, nodding, "I thought so. You see, when you were telling me about your travels on the Continent and in Africa, I said to myself: 'All that must take a lot of money,' and I made up my mind you were nice and rich."

"Did you?" says Randal, ironically. This girl is continually puzzling him by the *outré* things which she says. What other young woman, for instance, would dream of questioning him as to the extent of his finances, or owning she has been thinking about them? "I can tell you the exact amount of my income, if you wish?" he adds politely. "I have a watch which always loses, a good many more clothes than I want, and eight hundred a year; and when my father dies I

shall probably have about four times as much."

"Shall you really?" says Berrie. If he expected her to colour, or feel embarrassed at having extracted the above information, he is disappointed. She only draws a long, awe-struck breath, and adds, with perfect simplicity:


"And I have no money at all! No, I am wrong; I have three-and-sixpence left out of a sovereign that father sent me on my birthday, and I never had any more in my life, and don't suppose I ever shall have, unless——"

"Unless what?" asks Randal, as she pauses.

"Unless grandmamma were to get tired of me, and let me be a governess. I was educated for one, you know; and I should like it so much. And even Phil says he

wouldn't mind ; but poor father can't bear the idea, and wishes me to be here ; so, of course, I must stay."

"And your father is quite right," Randal puts in, with a warmth which rather surprises himself. "You a governess, with your——" ("pretty face and unconventional manners," he was going to say, but checks himself), "what do you know about governesses, child ? Why you could no more bear the constant confinement and degradation, the petty slights and dubious position, half servant, half lady, less thought of than the lap-dog, and harder worked than the housemaid, than that little sprig of maidenhair would bear detaching from its native rock, and transplanting into a London garden. Don't ever dream of trying it. I've seen enough of it in houses where I've stayed, to know



what it is, and I shouldn't like you to learn the same from experience."

He is so much in earnest that he has risen to his feet, all the lazy sarcasm gone out of his face, and a flash in his eyes, an imperious ring in his voice, which somehow brings the colour into Berrie's cheek so hotly, that she is fain to cover it with one little brown hand. Perhaps for that very reason, and because she is annoyed with herself for blushing, she answers more coolly than usual:

"Whether I try it or not depends on circumstances. You've described one sort of governess, perhaps I might be another. In the first place, you see, I like hard work, and don't see anything degrading in it; though I daresay fine ladies and gentlemen, with nothing to do, and more

money than they know what to do with, look on it differently."

"That is intended for a cut at me," says Randal quietly. "No, don't excuse yourself. Of course, I had no right to offer any opinion at all as to the future of a young lady with whom I am so slightly acquainted; but you are wrong in one item. I don't think any work degrading in itself; but there are cases in which it is made so by vulgar people, and I would rather not see a woman whom I——" Again he checks himself abruptly, and adds, with a slight colour in his cheek, "any woman involved in a career for which she does not seem to me fitted either by nature or inclination."

"I don't know anything about nature in my case," says Berrie, more obstinately

than usual; "but at present I'm afraid I've more inclination for even the hardest career, so it means work, than such a life as you say you lead and find so jolly. Idleness may suit you. It wouldn't me."

"So it seems," Randal answers, lazily; "but you are such a very energetic person. I wish, however," with rather startling abruptness, "that you would not mind answering me one question—honestly."


"What is it?" asks Berrie. "I'm sure to answer it honestly; because," laughing and blushing frankly, "I don't know how to beat about the bush in a pretty way, as some people do—you and grandmamma, for instance, when you're talking to one another."

"I see you don't, and I honour you for it. That brings me to my question, however. Don't you, in your heart, despise me very much?"

"Despise you!" repeats Berrie, too embarrassed by the suddenness of the question to know well what to say.

"Yes; don't you think me a very worthless sort of creature, without either faith, energy, or principle, and of no more use in the world than to cumber the ground he stands on? It has rather come to me that you do, and therefore I want to tell you that I thoroughly agree with you, and despise my own life quite as much as you can do. There's this excuse for it, however, it wasn't always the same; and I would alter it now, gladly, if I could only see the way. Unluckily for me, I don't."

"One can't always see one's way to do what one wants," says Berrie slowly. There is a mingling of suppressed pain and recklessness in his tone which troubles her, "But I think one can always do something



—a man especially—and all the more if he has strength, and cleverness, and money. Please don't say that I despise you, though, for I never thought of doing so. I don't know anything about you, in the first place; and in the next, if you were as good-for-nothing as possible it wouldn't matter to me, except——”

“Except how?” Randal asks quietly.

“Except that it's always pleasant to be able to look up to and honour anybody one likes,” says Berrie, with perfect simplicity, adding quickly, as a sort of apology, “but there's ever such a wide difference between despising and not thinking very much of a person.”

“And what sort of man is it that you would honour, Miss Brown?” Randal speaks in the same gentle tone, no look or accent betraying the sudden warmth at his

heart, awakened by that innocent admission, "anybody one likes," and which not even Berrie's subsequent avowal that she does not think very much of him can wholly quench. He does not even look at her as he asks the question, and Berrie, who in the abstract interest of the subject has almost forgotten that he has any personal concern in it, answers readily enough, with a thoughtful pucker on her brow :

"Oh, how can one say, when one honours different men for such different things? My brother Tom, for instance, who stays at home and works on the farm just because poor father is so unlucky he feels he can't do without him, though the poor boy hates nothing so much, and has all his life longed for nothing but to go to sea, is quite as brave and noble, in my mind, as any of the men whom he'd give his head to

emulate. But I often think the heroes that no one makes much fuss over are the best after all. A great pet of Tom's, and mine, was that young officer of Marines in the *Calcutta*, one of our flagships, which was burnt off the east coast of South America some years ago. They didn't even give his name in the papers which told of the calamity; but I daresay you remember reading about it."

"No, I don't think I do. What was it?" Randal's face is still turned away, and there is a peculiar tone in his voice, but Berrie is too eager to perceive it.

"Why, the vessel had gone outside the harbour to practise, when she caught fire, and the flames were not discovered till it was too late to extinguish them. I think they managed to lower some of the boats, but there were not enough, or they got

swamped ; and though several small vessels came out to their assistance, the heat from the burning ship and the danger of her blowing up were so great that they dared not come very close, and numbers of the officers and men had to swim for it to the boats which were hovering round for their rescue. The whole ship was soon a mass of raging flame, and some were drowned in the attempt, while others were actually burnt in the water by pieces of blazing wood falling on them. It must have been a terrible sight."


"Terrible indeed," Randal mutters hoarsely, while Berrie, seeing that he is impressed, goes on the more ardently :

"There were about a hundred marines on board, and unfortunately hardly any of them could swim. They were all crowded in the part of the vessel nearest

the bows, where the fire was not so fierce——”

“The forecastle—yes,” Randal puts in hurriedly.

“And their lieutenant with them. He was quite a young fellow, and a great favourite with his brother-officers; and when they saw him from the boats, standing there with the light of the flames in his face, several called to him to jump overboard and he should be picked up. He wouldn't do so, however, while his men were on board, but stood by them, keeping up order and discipline among the terrified crowd, and encouraging them to leap into the water whenever the boats came near enough for the sailors to get hold of them, till the flames driving over them forced even the most timid to risk drowning in order to escape a worse death; and even



then he only caught hold of a rope that was fastened somewhere, and swinging himself over the side hung on by it while the men in the boats were trying to pick up the poor soldiers, who filled the air with their cries while they tried to keep themselves afloat till they were rescued. You see, he couldn't swim either; and though his friends shouted to him again and again that they would save him, and came dangerously near the ship for the purpose, he only shook his head, and called out: 'Never mind me. Save the men. I can stick on till they're aboard you.' And he did stick on," adds the girl, the tears coming into her bright eyes from earnestness. "He hung there obstinately till the rough rope had cut so deeply into the flesh of his hands that they could hold on no longer, and the flames were actually pouring out over his head; and

when he dropped into the water and was picked up, at the peril of the lives of those who did it, the whole of the inside of his hands was torn away, his hair was burnt, and he was barely able to say: 'My men—how many are saved?' before he fainted away. There! that's the sort of man that I honour," the girl concludes, turning her glowing face on her companion, so that he cannot avoid looking at her; "and I should always do so, even if he never did anything worth noticing again. But, indeed, I daresay he never did or will; for the paper said his career as a soldier was over, as his hands were so injured that he would never be able to use them again, or——"

"Ah! but that was all rubbish," Randal breaks in, a laugh lighting up his face. "Old Pearson said so; but everyone

knows what a croaker he was, and I always told him they'd heal up in time—as they have." He has half unconsciously opened his right hand, as he speaks, and is looking at it; and Berrie, looking too, sees, with a sudden qualm which sends the blood ebbing from her cheeks, that it is a peculiar pale brown colour, and strangely scarred and wrinkled.

"Why!—why——" she stammers; and then, the colour rushing back to the very roots of her hair: "You don't mean—— It—it couldn't have been you!"

CHAPTER VIII.

“VOWS TRACED ON SAND.”

“DON’T mind,” says Randal kindly, though, for a man of the world, his face is rather red too, and he finds it difficult to assume his usual nonchalant tone in the face of that old, well-remembered story. “I ought to have stopped you, perhaps; but you see it was all nonsense after all, and your hero no more a hero than anyone else. What’s a scarred hand? I wish you hadn’t seen it; but as you have, it will prove to you that the account you read was just

a bit of romance. Never use them again! Why at the end of a year I could do so pretty well; and now—— Well, Miss Brown, I don't like boasting, but if I had my rifle here, and a certain grizzly bear, who very much disturbed my slumbers one night on the Rocky Mountains, were up in yonder pine, I think you'd find that I could pull a trigger about as straight as most men. Anyhow, the bear came to that conclusion."

He says all this in a brisk, rapid way, on purpose to distract Berrie's mind from her blunder, and prevent her from feeling uncomfortable; but the task is not so easily achieved, for the poor child is quite overwhelmed—first, by the shock of discovering that Randal is the hero of her own story, and next, by an awful sense of her own absurdity and presumption in

rebuking a man for selfishness and inefficiency, and holding up to him his own actions as a pattern of the opposite virtues. And to have got so excited over the latter, too! Oh! he might have stopped her sooner. It was unfair to let her go on; but, perhaps, he was enjoying the triumph over her too much to check her, and the sense of the unfairness and the triumph together becomes in its turn too much for Berrie, and makes her turn away her head to hide the hot tears of shame and annoyance which have started to her eyes. She is mistaken, as usual, however, for there is no such thought in Randal's mind. On the contrary, when he sees that her confusion lies too deep to be lightly passed over, he drops his jesting tone, and, coming nearer to her, takes her hand gently, as he says :

"Miss Berrie, I have not vexed you, have I? Please tell me I have not. The honest truth is I hardly knew what to do, for it had never entered my head that anyone could make a fine story out of that old affair; only when I heard you putting your own pretty colour on it I couldn't make up my mind to interrupt you, and then I never meant you to guess. I'm afraid now, however, that you are thinking newspaper heroes are not to be believed in any more. Tell me, truly, am I not right?"

But Berry only shakes her head, her face still crimson, and her eyes looking anywhere but at him. "I'm not thinking that," she says dolefully.

"What then?" in the same gentle tone.

"Why, that—that I have made such

a—fool of myself ; and I know,” the childish, irrepressible tears springing afresh, “that you are laughing at me in your heart, for all you try to speak kindly. I know you are.”

“But, indeed, I am not,” he interrupts eagerly. “Laugh at you ? Why, I only feel too sorry, too ashamed, that I’m not the hero you had pictured me ; that I haven’t even that past glamour as an excuse for my present shortcomings. Don’t you see that I only clung on to the rope, because if I had tumbled into the water I should have been drowned ? and don’t you know”—a spasm of pain crossing his face even now at the recollection—“that, as it was, eighty out of a hundred of my men—eighty fine, brave, true-hearted fellows as ever stepped—did go to the bottom that night ; and any officer—any

man, indeed—would have been a miserable skunk if he had suffered his own life to be saved at the expense of one of theirs."

"I suppose yours was as valuable," Berrie interrupts brusquely, "and I expect some officers in your place would have thought so, and let themselves be saved."

"Not if they were in my place!" a peculiarly sad smile shading, rather than lighting, his face, as he answers her. "I suppose the excitement of a scene like that burning of the poor old *Calcutta* would drive everything else out of a man's head, especially if he'd a direct duty before him in keeping up those poor fellows' courage, and helping them to do what they could to save themselves; but otherwise I should feel rather ashamed of these hands of mine as a proof of male inconsistency, for, God knows, my life

was not worth a farthing to me then, and if anyone had asked me an hour previously what I would give to preserve it, I would have answered him : ‘Nothing. Not so much as the lifting of a finger.’”

“But why ? What made you feel so ?” asks Berrie wonderingly ; adding, however, with a quickly renewed colour : “I beg your pardon for asking. Please don’t tell me. I—I am very stupid.”

“Do you think so ? Then I don’t agree with you. Every word you have said to me to-day I thoroughly deserve, and you were an honest, right-thinking little girl to say them. If you really want to know what makes life so worthless to me you shall, though I don’t think it’s much excuse for my worthlessness after all.”

“But I didn’t say you were worthless,” Berrie interpolates, and is silenced with :

"Not exactly, perhaps, but you implied it, and you were right. Somehow I think you have rather a true way of looking at things in general with those bright eyes of yours, so perhaps," with a short laugh, "if I were to tell you my past story you might help me to see, somewhat more clearly than I do, what lies before me in the future. You don't even know my name, do you? and that's not fair, as I have found out both of yours."

"No, I don't, but—that doesn't matter," says Berrie shyly.

Grandmamma, with that reticence which the venerable lady chooses to observe in the matter of Captain Comyns, has not mentioned to her young relative the fact that she has found out his name, and Berrie, who is rather fond of giving titles of her own to the people with whom she

comes in contact, has irreverently nicknamed him "Uncle Ned," in reference to that ancient negro who "had no hair on the top of his head on the place where the wool ought to grow." At any other time she might have told him so ; but just now she is suffering from an unaccountable fit of shyness, which takes away her customary volubility. Notwithstanding, she cannot help a pleased little flutter at her heart at the prospect of learning something more about him. After all he is her hero, and it does seem hard not even to know his name.

"That first then," says the hero, smiling rather forcedly as he marks her curious, excited face. "It's not a pretty one, Randal Comyns, at your service, supposed to be descended from a certain blackguardly Scotch freebooter called the 'Red Comyn,'

but humbly trusting that his real parentage dates from some honester source ; and the story is not pretty either, nor even new. What is there new in the tale of a weak man's life ruined by a woman ? and after all that's the gist of it. I think I told you once that I'm not a favourite with my father. I don't know why exactly, except that he was always a very jealous man, passionately in love with my poor mother, and as passionately disliking the whole of her family, and any other person (male or female) who ventured to claim any portion of love from her ; while she, on her side, was warmly attached to her own people, and, out of wilfulness as it were, made far more of me, who took closely after them both in face and character, than of my eldest brother, who was simply his

father in miniature. For this reason Sir Comyn, perhaps not unnaturally, hated me even as a boy ; and, which is still more natural, hates me doubly now, since both the son he loved and the wife, who might have loved him better, are laid in their graves, and only I, the offending one, am left to him, in the envious and unenviable position of his heir. Now, I see you are going to blame him ; but please don't. Fate may have dealt rather hardly with me in this ; but, on the whole, I think it has dealt harder with him. A man can't help his feelings, and I'll say this for my father, he never allowed his to make him either cruel or unjust to me —never once."

He says this in a tone of proud respect, which makes Berrie feel that perhaps fate has been hard on the poor old baronet in

shutting his heart against a son whose filial affection might otherwise have atoned to him for all he has lost. As she has been forbidden to say what was first in her mind, however, she says nothing, and Randal goes on cheerfully :

"Well, that sort of thing didn't make home very pleasant to me, even when I was a lad, and as I got older and saw that I was merely a subject of discord and annoyance I grew anxious to leave it, and make a way for myself. I knew that there was nothing which would please the governor more, and though it was a hard matter to get my dear mother's consent (I believe she would have liked to tie me to her apron-string all her life) she did give it at last, and I joined the marines. It was through doing this that I first met Vivian Le Mesurier."

His voice changes suddenly at the name, and Berrie notes it with an odd, causeless twinge at her heart; but she is silent still, and he goes on quickly:

“Guy Le Mesurier, her brother, was a friend of mine, and a brother-officer on board the *Crocodile*. He was a nice, manly, dashing sort of lad, five or six years my junior; but he was fond of me, poor fellow, and when he died of fever in my arms, just a week from our leaving Barbadoes, I promised that on reaching England I would go to Jersey to see his people, and tell them all about his last days and death. He was an only son, poor boy, and knew that his loss would cut up the home party terribly. There were only three of them to suffer from it—Colonel Le Mesurier, Mrs. Clarke, a widowed daughter, who lived with her

father and managed the house and everything about it (young men included), and her younger sister, Vivian. I was a lieutenant then, and just six-and-twenty. She was two years younger, and the most beautiful girl in Jersey—I had almost said in Europe, for in all my wanderings I had never seen, and don't believe I ever shall see, any woman half as lovely. Lovely! Ah! I doubt"—looking down suddenly into poor Berrie's brown face, with its little turned-up nose, and chin propped on two sunburnt hands—"if you could even imagine Vivian; and yet, if not, how will you understand the glamour she cast over me; I who had been cruising about among swarthy Creoles and thick-lipped blacks for three years, and was then brought into the ~~same~~ house with a creature so fair she gave one an impression

of being all gold, and white, and dazzle ; a lily, powdered with gold-dust ; a sun-beam, shining through a white cloud ; an angel, if you like ; or, rather, 'a daughter of the gods, divinely tall, and most divinely fair.' Who would not have fallen in love with Vivian ?”

And as the vision of her beauty rises before him he is silent for a moment, silent with a yearning desire to look upon it again, until a little movement from Berrie arouses him, and he proceeds in a lighter tone.

“Anyhow, I did ; and as plenty of men had done so before me, I was not alone in my folly. She didn't discourage me ; on the contrary. Perhaps she hadn't discouraged them. She had a passive, regal way of suffering you to worship her and throw yourself at her feet, which


somehow compromised you without compromising herself, and left her tranquil, fair, and untouched, while you were buffetting with the storm-waves of your own passion for her. People who didn't like her called her a heartless coquette, all the more cruel and dangerous because utterly without feeling; and declared that while, after that vilest of all Jersey fashions, her slender throat and fingers were glittering with baubles, lavished on her by one lover after another, she herself had never cared, and never would care, for anyone. They said many other things, and I heard them all, and put them down as the wanton lies of malice and envy, for before long I believed that she did care for me—believed it with my whole soul, and felt prouder in my faith than if I had won all the treasures of the Indies; doubly

proud because of that very coldness of heart, which I was glad to hope she had shown to others. Her father and sister were very kind to me; and like the fool I was, I attributed their kindness to real liking, or, at least, to gratitude on poor Guy's account. The fact is the poor fellow had got himself into rather a hole when I first met him; been led astray by a bad lot of friends, and—— Well, I happened to help him out of it. That was all; but they made a great fuss about it at first, and though Mrs. Clarke did puzzle me now and then by her allusions to the baronetcy and my future career, it never dawned on me that she did not know I had a brother, and was only the younger son, with nothing of my own but my pay, for my dear mother was alive then, and my present income comes from her. What

their real ideas on the subject were, never came out till after I had proposed to Vivian, and been accepted.

"I was accepted. Whatever delusions I may have had since, there was no delusion on that score. With her own lips she told me that she loved me, and would be my wife; and when I lamented the time which must pass before I had a home to offer, and told her how hard I would strive for my promotion, she soothed me with sweet words; and smiling, promised to wait any time for me, and to let no one and nothing come between us. Ah dear! Looking back now at that time, it seems like some mocking dream, I was so madly, bewilderingly happy; and all things seemed to go well in the beginning, for my mother, believing Vivian to be all that I painted her, and only anxious

for my happiness, wrote her consent sweetly and lovingly, enclosing such a note to my sweetheart as touched even her ; while Sir Comyn, once assured as to the goodness of Miss Le Mesurier's parentage and family, was too indifferent to me, and perhaps too glad of anything which would settle me away from home, to object. He even promised to increase my allowance to three hundred a year, provided I did not marry until I got my captaincy ; and it was in communicating these arrangements that the fact of my brother's existence, or rather of his seniority to myself—I had often spoken of Arthur to Vivian at anyrate—came to the Le Mesuriers' ears. Blind as I was, I could not but see the immediate change in their estimation of me. They could not actually take back their consent. After encouraging



a young man for more than a year, up to the point of proposal, and then accepting him unequivocally, such a complete reversal of conduct was hardly possible; but when they found that, instead of a prospective baronet and landed proprietor, they were bestowing their prize beauty on a poor young lieutenant of marines, with only an allowance of three hundred a year besides his pay, their whole manner cooled to me. They made difficulties upon difficulties—refused to allow any definite time to be fixed for our marriage—hinted at doubts as to the stability of our mutual affection—and finally took advantage of my temporary absence in London to carry off Vivian to the Continent, with the evident intention of keeping her there until I was ordered to another ship: an event which they knew to be impending.

“It was a move that didn’t avail them much ! As soon as ever I had despatched the business I was engaged on, I followed them to Genoa, where they were established, and claiming the right of my betrothal to Vivian, remained there, braving snubs, slights, and every sort of unpleasantness—even my mother’s tender regrets over my absence—for the sake of a half-hour or ten minutes, perhaps, every other day or so with the woman I loved. She was not changed to me. I will say that for her. Demonstrative she had never been, even when her family, now cold to rudeness, were lavishing cordiality and indulgence on me ; and though their present behaviour did not make her more so, it at least did not induce her to follow in their steps. She was invariably sweet, gentle mannered, sometimes almost tender towards me,

accepting without demur all my passionate devotion to her, and not only discussing but encouraging as one whose position as my affianced wife gave her a right to do, a resolve I had made of leaving the service, of which I was so fond, as soon as we were married, and getting a berth under the Foreign Office—a consulship or something of that sort—in order to better her position. Her last words to me when, my orders to join the *Calcutta* having come, I parted from her in the gardens of that old Genoese villa, were solemn promises of a love and fidelity which should know no wandering till I came to claim their fulfilment; and—how do you think they were kept?"

With a sudden movement he draws from an old note-book in his waistcoat-pocket that cutting from *The Times* which we

have seen before, and tosses it with an almost angry gesture into Berrie's lap.

“Look for yourself. That is how women keep faith!” he says bitterly; “and I got that within ten months—less than one year—from the last kiss she gave me at parting. I had not heard from her for several weeks and had begun to feel anxious and uneasy, fearing she might be ill, but that was all, I had no other warning. I was loving her—thinking of her morning, noon, and night; working, praying for her as the one love of my life, the wife I had already fancied her; and all the time she was actually *married*—married to a man double her own age; the son of a Scotch trader and a German Jewess, a wealthy merchant; and she had sent me no word or line! No, not so much as a message to break the tidings of her treachery to

me! The newspaper, however, which contained the advertisement was addressed to me in her sister's handwriting; and it was that which made me open it, even while a letter from my mother was lying beside me with the seal unbroken. Unbroken! Yes (my God, I can't bear to think of it now, so bitter was my punishment), for it remained so, forgotten, like most other things, for days and days in the misery and madness of Vivian's betrayal; and what do you think it contained?—the last words my blessed mother ever wrote; words of love and sympathy and pitiful yearning for me, penned upon her very deathbed. A fortnight later I had a note from my brother to tell me she was gone. I had lost wife and mother in the same month!"

CHAPTER IX.

**"A WORTHLESS WOMAN, MERE COLD CLAY,
AS ALL FALSE THINGS ARE."**

AGAIN Randal stops. The man has loved his mother very dearly. Perhaps before Vivian warped it his nature was a loving one altogether; and the last part of his story has been hard in telling. His face is turned from Berrie, but the big veins standing out on his clasped hands show what the memory of that day he has been recalling still is to him; and in her girlish sorrow and compassion the maiden ventures

to stretch out her own fingers, and, very timidly, to touch his arm with them.

"Please, don't tell me any more. Please!" she says, with a trembling earnestness of sympathy which cannot offend. "I am sure it hurts you, and you have no call to do it. I am very sorry. How could she! But you are better free from her. She was not worth having or grieving over."

"Do you think so?" asks Randal, moving his hand to take the little brown one so pitifully touching him, and holding it for a moment in a kindly pressure which reassures her for her boldness. "Then you had better hear the rest. It won't take long, and you can give me your advice afterwards. You may guess for yourself that life didn't seem much worth living after a shock like that. I did think at

first of asking for leave and going home ; but where was the good ? The thing was done, and the woman lost. I had staked my all on her faith, and now that it was broken there was nothing left to risk or win ; while my mother's death took away the last link I had to home or kindred sympathy. The affair of the fire happened not long afterwards ; and for a year or so I was shelved, and put on the sick list. Those old women called doctors vowed my lungs had got damaged as well as my hands, and packed me off to Madeira, of all dead-alive places ; and though I didn't mind it, for anywhere seemed better than England just then, I suppose it was about the worst thing for a man made morbid already by brooding over wrongs and losses which no broodings could remedy, and condemned to almost total helplessness and

idleness. Ugh! The thought of those lonely, handcuffed months in Madeira makes me shiver now! I don't wonder some of my old messmates hardly knew me when I got back to active service again. Then came my brother's death. I was in China at the time; but my father wrote for me to come home, and I got leave of absence and went. The poor old governor! That last blow had pretty well knocked him down; and when he expressed a wish that, under the present altered circumstances, I should leave the service, I felt I should be a brute not to agree at once, and even to stay at home if he pleased, hopelessly dreary as such a life seemed to me. After all he was my father, you see, an old man, and nearly blind then; and though he didn't like me he had always treated me justly, and in common justice I owed him a son's duty."

"I think that was good of you," says Berrie in her quaint, motherly way; "but how was it you came to travel then?"

"Because after a time I found out that my presence at home was really more pain than pleasure to the poor old man, reminding him constantly as it did of the absence of those whom he so much preferred to me. Besides, he was always wanting me to marry, so as to carry on the family, and that was the one thing I couldn't do, even to please him; so it ended in my going on the Continent for a few months; and there, in Paris, one fine spring day, I met—Vivian!"

Even now he seems to find it difficult to utter that name, the name of this woman so passionately loved, so utterly unworthy, and Berrie sees his right hand unconsciously

clench itself over a plant growing near him and crush it ere he proceeds.

"It was in the Bois. She was gorgeously dressed, and, yes, more beautiful than ever. The two years, which had passed like a scorching whirlwind over me, had simply enriched and perfected her loveliness; but she recognised me at once, and before I had time to think what to do, had stopped her carriage and given me her two hands, as though I were a dearly-loved friend. My God, what I felt in holding them again!

"She knew all about my altered prospects it seemed, and was very gentle and sympathetic, and almost tender; pleading quite humbly that I would be friendly with her, and dropping hints, more than actual words, leading me to infer that her marriage had been no choice of her own, but the result

of some cruel deceit, which had aroused her foolish pride and jealousy. I daresay I should have heard the whole story soon. She did make me promise to go and see her next day, but that promise was never kept. I'm not going to tell an innocent child like you what the sight of the woman who when I last saw her had nestled in my arms as my promised wife was to me, or what mad thoughts kept up the devil's own racket in my brain through the long hours of the night that followed. Enough that I knew that, despite everything—treachery, heartlessness, and deceit—I loved Vivian Bruce as wildly as I had ever loved Vivian Le Mesurier, and that no good could come to either her or me of it. I had been weak enough before, but I was stronger then; and long before the hour at which Mrs. Bruce had told me she would be at

home I was on my way to Marseilles, *en route* for Algeria, with one rooted determination that until I could return cured I would not return at all. Since then I've travelled about in the most uncivilised corners of the earth; and, in company with my trusty rifle, have seen adventures enough to knock most romantic follies out of a man's head. It was three years since I left England when I set foot on it again last April; and I did so honestly feeling that, if by any chance I were ever to meet Vivian Bruce again, it would be with the coolness and composure of any old acquaintance towards a married woman. How do you think I was proved?"

"I—don't know," says Berrie. A kind of dread, though of what she has no idea, is taking possession of her, and she speaks a little breathlessly; but Randal takes her

agitation for mere girlish curiosity and interest, and smiles a little sadly as he answers her.

“I went straight to London, and almost the first name I heard was hers—Vivian’s. The woman I had thought to forget altogether was there, living within a stone’s throw of me. The woman I had put out of my heart and mind as another man’s wife was within an ace of being free for anyone to woo or marry! Her husband was dying. Within a fortnight he was dead; and the friend who told me—a true good fellow, who has known Vivian all her life—conveyed to me a long story of how her father and sister had deceived her with a made-up lie of my infidelity, and then had half forced, half coaxed her into a marriage with a man for whom she had no slightest caring—nay, with her love for me still

alive. He even tries to persuade me that she loves me still, and that if I choose I may even now—now, after all that is past—win her and make her my wife when her first mourning is over. Shall I? That is the question which I said I had to ask you. Shall I believe him, ignore the past, and take gratefully what I have so craved for, even at this late hour; or is it fair to query, should I have heard this story at all but for Arthur's death having put me in the very position she believed me to hold when she first accepted me long ago, and to the fact of her husband—stingy old brute—having marked his sense of certain jealous heartburnings, which his wife's beauty had caused him to suffer now and again, by leaving her only a miserable pittance out of his immense property, and the whole of the remainder to his own relatives? That's

an ugly thought, isn't it? and I suppose I ought to feel ashamed of it, but somehow it won't be got rid of; and, on my soul, I don't know what to do. Will you decide for me? How does it look to those clear child's eyes of yours? I would rather trust them than my own. They must be impartial, at any rate."

He says it in a rapid, feverish way, his blue, short-sighted eyes looking straight into Berrie's, as though he were bent, in sober earnest, on leaving the case to her decision, and had determined to give himself no appeal from it; and partly because she feels the impress of this wish so strongly, partly from a vain desire to escape from satisfying it, the girl flushes nervously, and turns her head away as she answers:

"Now you are joking. How can it matter to you what *I* think? And I do

not even know you. You cannot really mean me to answer such a question."

"Indeed but I do," says Randal quickly. "Isn't there an old proverb that 'lookers-on see most of the game,' and who can be so bad a judge in a love story as the lover himself?"

"But *are* you in love then?" Berrie asks quite simply, though she blushes a little as she says it. "That is just what puzzles me. If you were——" but Randal interrupts her.

"Is there any doubt of it?" he asks sharply, yet with a strange look of relief on his face, as though the suggestion were, if novel, scarcely unpleasant. "Vivian seems to have none at anyrate; and, indeed, I should have thought *you* would be feeling more inclined to ridicule me for the folly of a passion which has helped

me to waste some of the best years of my life than to suspect its ever having existed."

"Ah! but I do not," says Berrie eagerly, almost sadly. "I am sure, quite sure, that you did love her, and all the more because of your going away from Paris that time; but suppose that your doing so did have the effect you wished—that you are cured, though you do not know it yourself? I—I could not help wondering if it might be so," she adds very timidly, as though frightened at her own audacity. Randal has no mercy on her, however.

"You mean that you think I am," he says abruptly. "Pray do not mind speaking out," and there is an imperious ring in his voice which almost constrains the girl to answer.

"I don't think you could speak as you

have done, see her conduct as clearly as—as you seem to do, if you still loved her as you did long ago. You would have *tried* to make it sound better, and to find excuses for her; and you would have been glad even to hear that story your friend told you. No, I do not think you love her. Please, I wish you would not make me say so."

"And you do not guess how glad, how thankful I would have been if I could have believed it," he says harshly. "But what excuse is there for falsehood, or for breaking a plighted word? You are a woman, and a true one, I think. Would a true woman, under any circumstances, have acted to a man as Vivian did to me?"

To his great surprise the face he is looking at blanches suddenly, and the lips quiver as they answer very low :

“ I suppose—not.”

“ You suppose not ! Put it to yourself then. Could *you* have done it—suffered a man to love and make love to you, without word or sign of discouragement ; accepted calmly and deliberately the gift of his whole heart and life and honour ; taken his caresses and his confidence ; and solemnly pledged yourself to be faithful to him till death, only to break that pledge on the first temptation—a fit of jealousy, a lying tale, even (put it on the plea she now denies) a stronger affection for another man ? Could you do this, and fling overboard, without pity or remorse, a man who for days and weeks and months has been looking on you as his affianced wife ; who has never had an untrue or a wandering thought from you, and has but one desire—to devote his whole life

to making you happy and content? Don't tell me that loving, honest-hearted women—if there be any such—do this sort of thing, play fast and loose so lightly, and snap vows in twain which such a God as you believe in must count as only one degree less sacred than those ratified at the altar. It is not true!"

He is so passionately in earnest that he does not see how pale and frightened the girl looks, or that there are tears in the bright brown eyes. She answers him, however, though in a strange husky voice.

"No, you are right. It would be very wrong. I could not be as base as that."

"Ah!" he says bitterly. "And yet, feeling the baseness, the worthlessness of the woman who could, how I went on loving her, mourning over her, suffering

her even to rob my angel mother of regrets which should have belonged to her alone ! Why that very day in Paris I could almost, looking in her eyes, have forgiven her everything, and had she been but free, have taken her back to my heart fully and gratefully. It was because I knew that I loved her so—she, another man's wife—that I fled like a coward from the place she was in. I would give all I have in the world to feel the same now ; and yet—would it alter the truth if I did ; or make our marriage anything but a mockery of what it should have been ? ”

“Not unless you loved her,” Berrie says timidly. “That is what I think. Love would *make* you believe all things rather than that she was false or unworthy. You do not believe in her ; therefore you don't love her, not as a man should love

his wife ; I mean, with trust and honour as his better self.”

“That is spoken as a woman who is to be trusted and honoured would speak ; but, my child, when you’ve seen more of the world you’ll find that all women don’t look on marriage in the same light, and are not exacting of trust or honour from or in their husbands. However, I suppose you are so far right that, as I sit here this evening looking back upon the past, I don’t much believe in Vivian Bruce, and still less in the story of her being deceived and over-persuaded into the marriage with her worthy husband. She was never the sort of woman to be either led or driven in any direction where she did not choose to go ; and to break faith with me on the strength of a mere story, without even trying to prove it, *might* be explained

satisfactorily in a three-volume novel, but is rather difficult to whitewash in real life. Yet, for all that, I don't doubt that she likes me in a way, and—except under strong temptation—will make me a fairly honest and amiable wife now that her first venture has ended less brilliantly than she thought for. Besides, she evidently expects it; and on my side I have a kind of half feeling that she has a right to do so. No, not a right that the world would recognise, I daresay, but just this, that I pledged *my* faith and honour to her once, and how can I blame her for breaking hers with me, if I but do the same now?"

"But that is absurd. She has set you free herself," cries Berrie warmly. "No, I cannot help saying it; it seems horrible—unnatural, to discuss such a thing in

such a way. Your *wife*! Why, even I," her little brown face glowing with quick colour, "would feel it as nothing but the grossest insult if a man were to ask me to marry him while he held me so low as to despise himself for loving me, and me for accepting him. And that is what you would do! How can you even think of it?"

"You tell me not to do so then?" says Randal slowly. "That is your advice?"

And Berrie answers: "Yes, I do. I think it would be foolish, mad, and that you would only make yourself miserable and her too. Forget her; she is not worth your thinking about her any more. Let her go."

"Very well, I will do so. I told you I would leave it to you, and I am con-

tent. Only don't speak of yourself and Vivian in the same breath, as you did just now. She would not think of wifehood as you do, child."

There is something different in his tone ; something gentler and more respectful than its usual accent. Instinctively Berrie feels it, and with the feeling there dawns on her what a strange unconventional discussion they have been holding, these two, who have hardly learnt one another's names ! Is it possible that he does mean to abide by her words ; she, a mere country girl, and he a soldier, a man of the world, and her hero ? Or is he only laughing at her ? But the latter suspicion dies out of her eyes, as their hasty questioning gaze meets his ; and, as if he read it, he puts out his hand to her, and says gravely and kindly :

"I am not joking, and I thank you heartily, both for your patient listening and honest helping. Do you know that, except to one friend I spoke of, I have not uttered Vivian's name since her marriage. They say, however, that 'wisdom comes out of the mouths of babes,' and I had a fancy I should find it in your little head. I think that I have done so."

"Only I may be all wrong," Berrie interposes, with sudden fear. This girl, defiant and pugnacious as a small lioness at the least sign of patronage and superiority, becomes almost pathetically humble when treated tenderly and deferentially. Perhaps it is that so few have dealt with her in the latter way. "How can I know anything really? and you should not mind me. Oh, I wish you had not asked me."

“And I am glad that I did,” Randal says, smiling, “for you have only repeated what my better and healthier self has whispered to me loudly enough on many a day. The wonder is that I have waited to listen till I heard it from the lips of a little girl.”

They have been talking so long that the sun is getting low by now. Already it has touched the summit of that nearest hill, on the other side of the woods. Its beams, nearly level, are reflected redly from the girl's young face and the rugged table of rock on which they are seated. The exquisite green of the larch-tips has turned to vivid gold. Even the pines take a purple tinge in the ruddy glow, and Captain Comyns' fair moustache glitters like fiery threads, as the last rays catch

it in their way to rest on the white folds of Berrie's dress. Then the great orb gives a sudden dip. The white dress goes into shadow. A grey tint falls across the yellow lichens and fragrant thyme.

Randal says: "It is time for us to go," and holds out his hand, and Berrie rises up obediently. The sunlight fades from her shoulders and breast as she does so, and she gives a little shiver.

It has been such a strange, exciting, withal such a happy day; such a one as she has never had before; and now it is over, and she must go down into the valley where it is already cool and dusky. At the moment she almost feels as if the movement were an omen of her life to come; but Captain Comyns has seen the little tremor in her limbs, and

coming behind her flings the shepherd's plaid he carries over his shoulder round hers, and then gives her his hand to help her down the steep descent. It is a strong, warm grasp, even though given by a maimed hand ; and somehow it dispels Berrie's morbid fancy, and makes her feel herself again, as she springs from rock to root, and from root to tree stump, and over the tangle of blackberry shoots, down to the green covert of the fir woods.

There, it is twilight already—a green, gentle twilight, through which the two wend their way, speaking softly as though loud voices would have been a desecration ; but though the earth be in shadow the sky above them is taking brighter tints at every moment as if in that spirit of compensation than which there is

nothing lovelier in nature. The white clouds have warmed suddenly into gold, and the blue around glows with the deep intensity of a jewel. Under their feet are creeping the dusky shades of night ; but far away every separate mountain peak flames out with a fiery crest, and a purple glory sweeps over the distant pine forests. Then the sun goes down altogether, and the golden cloudlets change to soft flame colour with grey shadows on the upper sides, and these again to roses floating in an amethyst sea. A big night-moth rustles past Berrie's cheek, whirring its soft wings against the humid air. The red ribbons on her dress look black in this dim light, and a little cold breeze has sprung out of the sea, and ruffles the dusky hair about her brow.

She does not feel cold, however, for she has Randal's plaid on, and he draws it closer round her, and tucks it carefully under her little chin as they step out of the woods into the lane below. She does not feel tired either, though they have walked a good way, for her hand is on his arm, where he has put it on emerging into the road. A pleasant, dreamy feeling of perfect content and "cared-for-ness" has stolen over her. She can even feel a little pity for the woman who could throw away the vast stores of an honest man's love as lightly as she of whom they have been talking that day. She does not want to talk at all; and Randal, too, is silent till, in entering the gate of the hotel-garden, he plucks a sprig from a barberry bush, whose bronzed and rosy

leaves brush against his hand, and holds it up to Berrie, saying with a smile :

"Your namesakes, and not unlike you ! Were you christened Barberry ?"

"No, Barbara."

"I like Barberry better. Have I tired you very much to-day, Miss Barberry ?"

"No, not at all," her dark eyes looking up at him with a happy light in them, and no rebuke for the familiar name. The next moment they droop, however, and there is an unconscious quiver in the small fingers resting on his arm as she feels the bright-coloured leaves touch her hair softly before being nested in his button-hole.

"Then I may keep this spray in memory of our walk ?" Randal says gently. "It has been a very good one to me."

After that they go into the hotel together ; and Mrs. Henniker sees them coming, and says no word of scolding, though it is very late.

END OF VOL. I.

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